

# impulse

The NEW Science Fantasy

KEITH ROBERTS'

## The Lady Anne



# impulse

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The NEW Science Fantasy

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Associate Editor: Keith Roberts

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## Editorial . . . . . by Cyril Bonfiglioli

I must admit that after two years as editor of this magazine and its predecessor I am still by no means certain what my job is supposed to be when I sit down to write the editorial. Some American editors cheerfully pontificate about the future of life in general and the human race in particular: I fear my talent, like the housemaid's baby, is just a very little one and quite unsuited for such bold brushwork on so cosmic a canvas. Others delight in muttering darkly about new devices which will make all traditional scientists look like a lot of Charlies. I have no access to information of this kind and no scientific vocabulary to exploit it with if I had it. To me, a 100 per cent negative feedback is what happens when you bounce a baby too soon after its breakfast.

Gnomic utterances about "Whither Science-Fiction" and "Why Mainstream" are the easy option but I have the distinct impression that a large number of readers will start sticking straws in their hair and queuing up outside the bin if they are asked to read just one more dissertation on the nature of science-fiction—or indeed any paragraph containing the words "genre" and "extrapolation".

Discussions of absolute literary standards are, I feel, pretentious and out-of place in a magazine which is concerned with providing entertainment; the day I start thinking I'm the editor of *Horizon* the publishers will send for the plain van. Nor, I suppose, does anyone want to read my views on the Rhodesian crisis, female suffrage, or other burning questions of the day.

What is left but to comment on the contents of the present issue and to advertise future contents?

The high point of the issue is surely Judith Merril's **HOME CALLING** (first half) for Miss Merril—a writer for the connoisseur if ever there was one—is all too rare a contributor to English magazines. I don't believe I have ever read a more successful attempt to imagine an utterly alien way of thought. John Brunner's **BREAK THE DOOR OF HELL** was an obvious "yes" before I was

halfway through: I have read nothing so gruesome since M. R. James; nothing so bravely fantastic since James Branch Cabell. Keith Roberts continues his "Pavane" series with **THE LADY ANNE**—a story of long-haulers in an England where electricity, and a number of other things, are anathema. The cover is also his work and illustrates the story. John Rackham's **ROOM WITH A SKEW** was so popular that I have been pestering him for a follow-up; **A LIGHT FEINT** in this issue is the result.

This is an issue for the readers who often write to ask for longer material that they can get their teeth into: it will be noticed that there is an absence of what one reviewer calls "typical Bonfiglioli space-fillers". Which brings me to a point made by Mr. Chris Priest in the current **VECTOR** (No. 37—January) where he quite justly says of **SCIENCE FANTASY**, as we were called then, that "there is a wide gulf in this magazine at present, between the best and the worst". Oddly enough, insofar as this was often true in SF, it arose from questions of length. I have consistently given new writers tryouts during the past two years and although many have fallen by the wayside, many have reacted well to encouragement and are now selling to other magazines here and in the States. Unfortunately, until they get into their stride most novices tend to turn out very short squibs with trick endings and avoid the useful 8,000 words-plus lengths. These squibs are often very good indeed; I could easily fill a whole issue with really promising things in the 800 to 2,500-words class—but the result would look more like a birthday book than a balanced magazine. One can also usually buy very long material by good names prior to publication in book form but here too there is a limit beyond which imbalance occurs. A story of good middle length by a seasoned writer too often pivots on a notion which wasn't worth turning into a novel; the same size of story by a novice tends to be a little shaky and uncertain—yet one must have middle-length stories. Intending contributors please note.

*Continued on page 47*

*Although part of the story-cycle PAVANE, this is complete in itself.*



# PAVANE: THE LADY ANNE

by Keith Roberts

## PROLOGUE

On a warm July evening of the year 1588, in the royal palace of Greenwich, London, a woman lay dying, an assassin's bullets lodged in abdomen and chest. Her face was lined, her teeth blackened, and death lent her no dignity; but her last breath started echoes that ran out to shake a hemisphere. For the Faery Queen, Elizabeth the First, paramount ruler of England, was no more . . .

The rage of the English knew no bounds. A word, a whisper was enough; a half-wit youth, torn by the mob, calling on the blessing of the Pope . . . The English Catholics, bled white by fines, still mourning the Queen of Scots, still remembering the gory Rising of the North, were faced with fresh pogrom. Unwillingly, in self-defence, they took up arms against their countrymen as the flame lit by the Walsingham massacres ran across the land, mingling with the light of warning beacons the sullen glare of the *auto-da-fé*.

The news spread; to Paris, to Rome, to the strange fastness of the *Escurial* where Philip II still brooded on his Enterprise of England. The word of a land torn and divided against itself reached the great ships of the

Armada, threshing up past the Lizard to link with Parma's army of invasion on the Flemish coast. For a day, while Medina-Sidonia paced the decks of the *San Martin*, the fate of half the world hung in balance. Then his decision was made; and one by one the galleons and carracks, the galleys and the lumbering *urcas* turned north toward the land. Toward Hastings and the ancient battleground of Santlache, where history had been made once centuries before. The turmoil that ensued saw Philip ensconced as ruler of England; in France the followers of Guise, heartened by the victories across the Channel, finally deposed the weakened House of Valoise. The War of the Three Henrys ended with the Holy League triumphant, and the Church restored once more to her ancient power.

To the victor, the spoils. With the authority of the Catholic Church assured, the rising nation of Great Britain deployed her forces in the service of the Popes, smashing the Protestants of the Netherlands, destroying the power of the German city-states in the long-drawn Lutheran Wars. The Newworlders of the North American continent remained under the rule of Spain; Cook planted in Australasia the cobalt flag of the Throne of Peter.

In England herself, across a land half ancient and half modern, split as in primitive times by barriers of language, class and race, the castles of mediaevalism still glowered; mile on mile of unfelled woodland harboured creatures of another age. To some the years that passed were years of fulfilment, of the final flowering of God's Design; to others they were a new Dark Age, haunted by things dead and others best forgotten; bears and catamounts, dire-wolves and Fairies.

Over all, the long arm of the Popes reached out to punish and reward; the Church Militant remained supreme. But by the middle of the twentieth century widespread mutterings were making themselves heard. Rebellion was once more in the air . . .

*Durnovaria, England. 1965*

*The appointed morning came, and they buried Eli Strange. The coffin, black and purple drapes twitched*

*aside, eased down into the grave ; the white webbings slid through the hands of the bearers in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti . . . The earth took back her own. And miles away the Lady Anne cried cold and wreathed with steam, drove her great sea-voice across the hills . . .*

At three in the afternoon the engine sheds were already gloomy with the coming night. Light, blue and vague, filtered through the long strips of the skylights, showing the roofties stark like angular metal bones. Beneath, the locomotives waited brooding, hulks twice the height of a man, their canopies brushing the rafters. The light gleamed in dull spindle shapes, here from the strappings of a boiler, there from the starred boss of a flywheel. The massive road wheels stood in pools of shadow.

Through the half-dark a man came walking. He moved steadily, whistling between his teeth, boot studs rasping on the worn brick floor. He wore the jeans and heavy reefer jacket of a haulier ; the collar of the jacket was turned up against the cold. On his head was a woollen cape, once red, stained now with dirt and oil. The hair that showed beneath it was thickly black. A lamp swung in his hand, sending cusps of light flicking across the maroon livery of the engines.

He stopped by the last locomotive in line and reached up to hang the lamp from her hornplate. He stood a moment gazing at the big shapes of the engines, chafing his hands unconsciously, sensing the faint ever-present stink of smoke and oil. Then he swung onto the foot-plate of the loco and opened the firebox doors. He crouched, working methodically. The rake scraped against the firebars ; his breath jettied from him, rising in wisps over his shoulders. He laid the fire carefully, wadding paper, adding a criss-crossing of sticks, shovelling coal from the tender with rhythmic swings of his arms. Not too much fire to begin with, not under a cold boiler. Sudden heat meant sudden expansion and that meant cracking, leaks round the firetube joints, endless trouble. For all their power the locos had to be cossetted like children, coaxed and persuaded to give of their best.

The haulier laid the shovel aside and reached into the firebox mouth to sprinkle paraffin from a can. Then a soaked rag, a match . . . The lucifer flared brightly, sputtering. The oil caught with a faint *whoomph*. He closed the doors, opened the damper handles for draught. He straightened up, wiped his hands on cotton waste, then dropped from the footplate and began mechanically rubbing the brightwork of the engine. Over his head, long nameboards carried the style of the firm in swaggering, curlicued letters; *Strange and Sons of Dorset, Hauliers*. Lower, on the side of the great boiler, was the name of the engine herself. The *Lady Anne*. The hunk of rag paused when it reached the brass plate; then it polished it slowly, with loving care.

The *Anne* hissed softly to herself, cracks of flamelight showing round her ash pan. The shed foreman had filled her boiler and the belly and tender tanks that afternoon; her train was linked up across the yard, waiting by the warehouse loading bays. The haulier added more fuel to the fire, watched the pressure building slowly toward working head; lifted the heavy oak wheelscotches, stowed them in the steamer alongside the packaged watergauge glasses. The barrel of the loco was warming now, giving out a faint heat that radiated toward the cab.

The driver looked above him broodingly at the skylights. Mid-December; and it seemed as always God was stinting the light itself so the days came and vanished like the blinking of a dim grey eye. The frost would come down hard as well, later on. It was freezing already; in the yard puddles had crashed and tinkled under his boots, the skin of ice from the night before barely thinned. Bad weather for the hauliers, many of them had packed up already. This was the time for the wolves to leave their shelter, what wolves there were left. And the *routiers* . . . this was their season right enough, ideal for quick raids and swoopings, rich hauls from the last road trains of the winter. The man shrugged under his coat. This would be the last run to the coast for a month or so at least, unless that old goat Serjeantson across the way tried a quick dash with his vaunted Fowler triple compound. In that case the *Anne* would go out

again ; because Strange and Sons made the last run to the coast. Always had, always would . . .

Working head, a hundred and fifty pounds to the inch. The driver hooked the handlamp over the push-pole bracket on the front of the smokebox, climbed back to the footplate, checked gear for neutral, opened the cylinder cocks, inched the regulator across. The *Lady Anne* woke up, pistons thumping, crossheads sliding in their guides, exhaust beating sudden thunder under the low roof. Steam whirled back and smoke, thick and cindery, catching at the throat. The driver grinned faintly and without humour. The starting drill was part of him, burned on his mind. Gear check, cylinder cocks, regulator . . . He'd missed out just once, years back when he was a boy, opened up a four horse Roby traction with her cocks shut, let the condensed water in front of the piston knock the end out of the bore. His heart had broken with the cracking iron ; but old Eli had still taken a studded belt, and whipped him till he thought he was going to die.

He closed the cocks, moved the reversing lever to forward full and opened the regulator again. Old Dickon the yard foreman had materialized in the gloom of the shed ; he hauled back on the heavy doors as the *Anne*, jetting steam, rumbled into the open air, swung across the yard to where her train was parked.

Dickon, coatless despite the cold, snapped the linkage onto the *Lady Anne's* drawbar, clicked the brake unions into place. Three waggons, and the water tender ; a light enough haul this time. The foreman stood hands on hips in breeches and grubby, ruffed shirt, grizzled hair curling over his collar. "Best let I come with 'ee, Master Jesse . . ."

Jesse shook his head sombrely, jaw set. They'd been through this before. His father had never believed in overstaffing ; he'd worked his few men hard for the wages he paid, and got his money's worth out of them. Though how long that would go on was anybody's guess with the Guild of Mechanics stiffening its attitude all the time. Eli had stayed on the road himself up until a few days before his death ; Jesse had steered for him

not much more than a week before, taking the *Anne* round the hill villages topside of Bridport to pick up serge and worsted from the combers there; part of the load that was now outward bound for Poole. There'd been no sitting back in an office chair for old Strange, and his death had left the firm badly shorthanded; pointless taking on fresh drivers now with the end of the season only days away. Jesse gripped Dickon's shoulder "We can't spare thee, Dick. Run the yard, see my mother's all right. That's what he'd have wanted." He grimaced briefly. "If I can't take *Anne* out by now, 'tis time I learned."

He walked back along the train pulling at the lashings of the tarps. The tender and numbers one and two were shipshape, all fast. No need to check the trail load; he'd packed it himself the day before, taken hours over it. He checked it all the same, saw the tail lights and numberplate lamp were burning before taking the cargo manifest from Dickon. He climbed back to the footplate, working his hands into the heavy drivers' mitts with their leather padded palms.

The foreman watched him stolidly. "Take care for the *routiers*. Norman bastards . . ."

Jesse grunted. "Let 'em take care for themselves. See to things, Dickon. Expect me tomorrow."

"God be with 'ee . . ."

Jesse eased the regulator forward, raised an arm as the stocky figure fell behind. The *Anne* and her train clattered under the arch of the yard gate and into the rutted streets of Durnovaria.

Jesse had a lot to occupy his mind as he steered his load into the town; for the moment, the *routiers* were the least of his worries. Now, with the first keen grief just starting to lose its edge, he was beginning to realize how much they'd all miss Eli. The firm was a heavy weight to have hung round his neck without warning; and it could be there were awkward times ahead. With the Church openly backing the clamour of the Guilds for shorter hours and higher pay it looked as if the haulage companies were going to have to tighten their belts again, though God knew profit margins were thin

enough already. And there were rumours of more restrictions on the road trains themselves; a maximum of six trailers it would be this time, and a water cart. Reason given had been the increasing congestion round the big towns. That, and the state of the roads; but what else could you expect, Jesse asked himself sourly, when half the tax levied in the country went to buy gold plate for its churches? Maybe though this was just the start of a new trade recession like the one engineered a couple of centuries back by Gisevius. The memory of that still rankled in the West at least. The economy of England was stable now, for the first time in years; stability meant wealth, gold reserves. And gold, stacked anywhere but in the half-legendary coffers of the Vatican, meant danger . . .

Months back Eli, swearing blue fire, had set about getting round the new regulations. He'd had a dozen trailers modified to carry fifty gallons of water in a galvanised tank just abaft the drawbar. The tanks took up next to no space and left the rest of the bed for payload; but they'd be enough to satisfy the Sheriff's dignity. Jesse could imagine the old devil cackling at his victory; only he hadn't lived to see it. His thoughts slid back to his father, as irrevocably as the coffin had slid into the earth. He remembered his last sight of him, the grey wax nose peeping above the drapes as the visitors, Eli's drivers among them, filed through the morning room of the old house. Death hadn't softened Eli Strange; it had ravaged the face but left it strong, like the side of a quarried hill.

Queer how when you were driving you seemed to have more time to think. Even driving on your own when you had to watch the boiler gauge, steam head, fire . . . Jesse's hands felt the familiar thrilling in the wheelrim, the little stresses that on a long run would build and build till countering them brought burning aches to the shoulders and back. Only this was no long run; twenty, twenty-five miles, across to Wool then over the Great Heath to Poole. An easy trip for the *Lady Anne*, with an easy load; thirty tons at the back of her, and flat ground most of the way. The loco had only two gears;

Jesse had started off in high, and that was where he meant to stay. The *Anne*'s nominal horsepower was ten, but that was on the old rating; one horsepower to be deemed equal of ten circular inches of piston area. Pulling against the brake the Burrell would clock seventy, eighty horse; enough to shift a rolling load of a hundred and thirty tons, old Eli had pulled a train that heavy once for a wager. And won . . .

Jesse checked the pressure gauge, eyes performing their work nearly automatically. Ten pounds under max. All right for a while; he could stoke on the move, he'd done it times enough before, but as yet there was no need. He reached the first crossroads, glanced right and left and wound the wheel, looking behind him to see each waggon of the train turning sweetly at the same spot. Good; Eli would have liked that turn. The trail load would pull across the road crown he knew, but that wasn't his concern. His lamps were burning, and any drivers who couldn't see the bulk of *Anne* and her load deserved the smashing they would get. Forty-odd tons, rolling and thundering; bad luck on any butterfly cars that got too close.

Jesse had all the hauliers' ingrained contempt for internal combustion, though he'd followed the arguments for and against it keenly enough. Maybe one day petrol propulsion might amount to something and there was that other system, what did they call it, *diesel* . . . But the hand of the Church would have to be lifted first. The Bull of 1910. *Petroleum Veto*, had limited the capacity of IC engines to 150 cc's, and since then the hauliers had had no real competition. Petrol vehicles had been forced to fit gaudy sails to help tow themselves along; load hauling was a singularly bad joke.

Mother of God, but it was cold! Jesse shrugged himself deeper into his jacket. The *Lady Anne* carried no spectacle plate; a lot of other steamers had installed them now, even one or two in the Strange fleet, but Eli had sworn not the *Anne*, not the *Anne* . . . She was a work of art, perfect in herself; as her makers had built her, so she would stay. Decking her out with gewgaws, the old man had been half sick at the thought. It would

make her look like one of the railway engines Eli so despised. Jesse narrowed his eyes, forcing them to see against the searing bite of the wind. He glanced down at the tachometer. Road speed fifteen miles an hour, revs one fifty. One gloved hand pulled back on the reversing lever. Ten was the limit through towns, fixed by the laws of the realm; and Jesse had no intention of being run in for exceeding it. The firm of Strange had always kept well in with the J.P.'s and sergeants of police; it partially accounted for their success.

Entering the long High Street, he cut his revs again. The *Anne*, balked, made a frustrated thunder; the sound echoed back, clapping from the fronts of the grey stone buildings. Jesse felt through his boot soles the slackening pull on the drawbar and spun the brakewheel; a jack-knifed train was about the worst blot on a driver's record. Reflectors behind the tail lamp flames clicked upward, momentarily doubling their glare. The brakes bit; compensators pulled the trail load first, straightening the waggons. He eased back another notch on the reversing lever; steam admitted in front of the pistons checked *Anne*'s speed. Ahead were the gaslamps of the town centre, high on their standards; beyond, the walls and the East Gate.

The sergeant on duty saluted easily with his halberd, waving the Burrell forward. Jesse shoved at the lever, wound the brakes away from the wheels. Too much stress on the shoes and there could be a fire somewhere in the train; that would be bad, most of the load was inflammable this time.

He ran through the manifest in his mind. The *Anne* was carrying bale on bale of serge; bulkwise it accounted for most of her cargo. English woollens were famous on the Continent; correspondingly, the serge combers were among the most powerful industrial groups in the Southwest. Their manufactories and storing sheds dotted the villages for miles around; monopoly of the trade helped keep old Eli out ahead of his rivals. Then there were dyed silks from Anthony Harcourt at Mells; Harcourt shifts were sought after as far abroad as Paris. And crate after crate of turned ware, products of the local

bodgers, Erasmus Cox and Jed Roberts of Durnovaria, Jeremiah Stringer out at Martinstown. Specie, under the County Lieutenant's seal; the last of the season's levies, outward bound for Rome. And machine parts, high grade cheeses, all kinds of oddments. Clay pipes, horn buttons, ribbons and tape; even a shipment of cherry-wood Madonnas from that Newworld-financed firm over at Beaminster. What did they call themselves, *Calmers of the Soul, Inc.* . . .? Woollens and worsteds atop the water tender and in waggon number one, turned goods and the rest in number two. The trail load needed no consideration. That would look after itself.

The East Gate showed ahead, and the dark bulk of the wall. Jesse slowed in readiness. There was no need; the odd butterfly cars that were still braving the elements on this bitter night were already stopped, held back out of harm's way by the signals of the halberdiers. The *Anne* hooted, left behind a cloud of steam that hung glowing against the evening sky. Passed through the ramparts to the heath and hills beyond.

Jesse reached down to twirl the control of the injector valve. Water, preheated by its passage through an extension of the smokebox, swirled into the boiler. He allowed the engine to build up speed. Durnovaria vanished, lost in the gloom astern; the light was fading fast now. To right and left the land was featureless, dark; in front of him was the half-seen whirling of the crankshaft, the big thunder of the engine. The haulier grinned, still exhilarated by the physical act of driving. Flamelight striking round the firebox doors showed the wide, hard jaw, the deepset eyes under brows that were level and thickly black. Just let old Serjeantson try and sneak in a last trip. The *Anne* would take his Fowler, up hill or down; and Eli would churn with glee in his fresh-made grave . . .

The *Lady Anne*. A scene came unasked into Jesse's mind. He saw himself as a boy, voice half broken. How long ago was that, eight seasons, ten? The years had a way of piling themselves one atop the next, unnoticed and uncounted; that was how young men turned into old ones. He remembered the morning the *Anne* first arrived

in the yard. She'd come snorting and plunging through Durnovaria, fresh from Burrell's works in far-off Thetford, paintwork gleaming, whistle sounding, brasswork a-twinkle in the sun; a compound locomotive of ten N.H.P., all her details specified from flywheel decoration to static discharge chains. Spudpan, bellypan, water-lifts; Eli had got what he wanted all right, one of the finest steamers in the West. He'd fetched her himself, making the awkward journey across many counties to Norfolk; nobody else had been trusted to bring back the pride of the fleet. And she'd been his steamer ever since; if the old granite shell that had called itself Eli Strange ever loved anything on earth, it had been the huge Burrell.

Jesse had been there to meet her, and his kid brother Tim and the others; James and Micah, dead now—God rest their souls—of the Plague that had taken them both that time in Bristol. He remembered how his father had swung off the footplate, looked up at the loco standing shaking like a live thing still and spewing steam. The firm's name had been painted there already, the letters glowing along the canopy edge, but as yet the Burrell had no name of her own. "What be 'ee g'wine call en?" his mother had shouted, over the noise of her idling; and Eli had rumpled his hair, puckered his red face. "Danged if I knows . . ." They had *Thunderer* already and *Apocalypse*, *Oberon* and *Ballard Down* and *Western Strength*; big-sounding names, right for the machines that carried them. "Danged if I knows" said old Eli, grinning; and Jesse's voice had spoken without his permission, faltering up in its adolescent yodel. "The *Lady Anne*, sir . . . *Lady Anne* . . ."

A bad thing that, speaking without being addressed. Eli had glared, shoved up his cap, scrubbed at his hair again; and burst into a roar of laughter. "I likes 'en . . . bugger me if I don't like 'en . . ." And the *Lady Anne* she had become, over the protests of his drivers, even over old Dickon's head. He claimed it 'were down-right luck' to call a loco after 'some bloody 'oman . . .' Jesse remembered his ears burning, he couldn't tell whether with shame or pride. He'd unwished the name a

thousand times, but it had stuck. Eli liked it ; and nobody crossed old Strange, not in the days of his strength.

So Eli was dead. There'd been no warning ; just the coughing, the hands gripping the chair arms, the face that suddenly wasn't his father's face, staring. Quick dark spattering of blood, the lungs sighing and bubbling ; and a clay-coloured old man lying abed, one lamp burning, the priest in attendance, Jesse's mother watching emptyfaced. Father Thomas had been cold, disapproving of the old sinner ; the wind had soughed round the house vicious with frost while the priest's lips absolved and mechanically blessed . . . but that hadn't been death. A death was more than an ending ; it was like pulling a thread from a richly patterned cloth. Eli had been a part of Jesse's life, as much a part as his bedroom under the eaves of the old house. Death disrupted the processes of memory, jangled old chords that were maybe best left alone. It took so little imagination for Jesse to see his father still, the craggy face, weathered hands, haulier's greasy buckled cap pulled low over his eyes. The knotted muffler, ends anchored round the braces, the greatcoat, old thick working corduroys. It was here he missed him, in the clanking and the darkness, with the hot smell of oil, smoke blowing back from the tall stack to burn his eyes. This was how he'd known it would be. Maybe this was what he'd wanted.

Time to feed the brute. Jesse took a quick look at the road stretching out straight in front of him. The steamer would hold her course, the worm steering couldn't kick back. He opened the firebox doors, grabbed the shovel. He stoked the fire quickly and efficiently, keeping it dished for maximum heat. Swung the doors shut, straightened up again. The steady thunder of the loco was part of him already, in his bloodstream. Heat struck up from the metal of the footplate, working through his boots ; the warmth from the firebox blew back, breathed against his face. Time later for the frost to reach him, nibbling at his bones.

Jesse had been born in the old house on the outskirts of Durnovaria soon after his father started up in business there with a couple of ploughing engines, a thresher and

an Aveling and Porter tractor. The third of four brothers, he'd never seriously expected to own the fortunes of Strange and Sons. But God's ways were as inscrutable as the hills; two Strange boys had gone blackfaced to Abraham's bosom, now Eli himself . . . Jesse thought back to long summers spent at home, summers when the engine sheds were boiling hot and reeking of smoke and oil. He'd spend his days there, watching the trains come in and leave, helping unload on the warehouse steps, climbing over the endless stacks of crates and bales. There too were scents; the richness of dried fruits in their boxes, apricots and figs and raisins; sweetness of fresh pine and deal, fragrance of cedarwood, thick headiness of twist tobacco cured in rum. Champagne and Oporto for the luxury trade, cognac, French lace; tangerines and pineapples, rubber and saltpetre, jute and hemp . . .

Sometimes he'd cadge rides on the locos, down to Poole or Bourne Mouth, across to Bridport, Wey Mouth; or west down to Isca, Lindinis. He went to Londinium once, and northeast again to Camulodunum. The Burrels and Claytons and Fodens ate miles; it was good to sit on the trail load of one of those old trains, the engine looking half a mile away, hooting and jetting steam. Jesse would pant on ahead to pay the toll keepers, stay behind to help them close the gates with their long white and red striped bars. He remembered the rumbling of the many wheels, the thick rising of dust from the rutted trackways. The dust lay on the verges, and hedges, making the roads look like white scars crossing the land. Odd nights he'd spend away from home, squatting in some corner of a tavern bar while his father caroused. Sometimes Eli would turn morose, and cuff Jess upstairs to bed; at others he'd get expansive and sit and spin tall tales about when he himself was a boy, when the locos had shafts in front of their boilers and horses between them to steer. Jesse had been a brakeboy at eight, a steersman at ten for some of the shorter runs. It had been a wrench when he'd been sent away to school.

He wondered what had been in Eli's mind. "Get some bliddy eddycation" was all the old man had said. "That's

what counts, lad . . ." Jesse remembered how he'd felt; how he'd wandered in the orchards behind the house, seeing the cherry plums hanging thick on the old trees that were craggy and leaning, just right to climb. The apples, Bramleys and Lanes and Haley's Orange; Commodoore pears hanging like rough-skinned bombs against walls mellow with September sunlight. Always before, Jesse had helped bring in the crop; but not this year, not any more. His brothers had learned to write and read and figure in the little village school, and that was all; but Jesse had gone to Sherborne, and stayed on to College in the old University town. He'd worked hard at his languages and sciences, and done well; only there had been something wrong. It had taken him years to realize his hands were missing the touch of oiled steel, his nostrils needed the scent of steam. He'd packed up and come home and started work like any other haulier; and Eli had said not a word. No praise, no condemnation. Jesse shook his head. Deep down he'd always known without any possibility of doubt just what he was going to do. At heart, he was a haulier; like Tim, like Dickon, like old Eli. That was all; and it would have to be enough.

The *Anne* topped a rise and rumbled onto a downslope. Jesse glanced at the long gauge glass by his knee and instinct more than vision made him open the injectors, valve water into the boiler. The loco had a long chassis; that meant caution descending hills. Too little water in her barrel and the forward tilt would uncover the firebox crown, melt the fusible plug there. All the steamers carried spares, but fitting one was a job to avoid. It meant drawing the fire, a crawl into a baking-hot firebox, an eternity of wrestling overhead in darkness. Jesse had burned his quota of plugs in his time, like any other tyro; it had taught him to keep his firebox covered. Too high a level on the other hand meant water reaching the steam outlets, descending from the stack in a scalding cloud. He'd had that happen too.

He spun the valve and the hissing of the injectors stopped. The *Anne* lumbered at the slope, increasing her speed. Jesse pulled back on the reversing lever, screwed

the brakes on to check the train ; heard the altered beat as the loco felt the rising gradient, and gave her back her steam. Light or dark, he knew every foot of the road ; a good driver had to.

A solitary gleam ahead of him told him he was nearing Wool. The *Anne* shrieked a warning to the village, rumbled through between the shuttered cottages. A straight run now, across the heath to Poole. An hour to the town gates, say another half to get down to the quay, if the traffic holdups weren't too bad . . . Jesse chafed his hands, worked his shoulders inside his coat. The cold was getting to him now, he could feel it settling in his joints.

He looked out to either side of the road. It was full night, and the Great Heath was pitchy black, Far off he saw or thought he saw the glimmer of a will-o-the-whisp, haunting some stinking bog. A chilling wind moaned in from the emptiness. Jesse listened to the steady pounding of the Burrell and as often before the image of a ship came to him. The *Lady Anne*, a speck of light and warmth, forged through the waste like some vessel crossing a vast and inimical ocean.

This was the twentieth century, the age of reason ; but the heath was still the home of superstitious fears. The haunt of wolves and witches, were-things and Fairies ; and the *routiers* . . . Jesse curled his lip. 'Norman bastards' Dickon had called them. It was as accurate a description as any. True, they claimed Norman descent ; but in this Catholic England of a thousand years after the Conquest bloodlines of Norman, Saxon and original Celt were hopelessly mixed. What distinctions existed were more or less arbitrary, re-introduced in accordance with the racial theories of Gisevius the Great a couple of centuries ago. Most people had at least a smattering of the five tongues of the land ; the Norman French of the ruling classes, Latin of the Church, Modern English of commerce and trade, the outdated Middle English and Celtic of the churls. There were other languages of course ; Gaelic, Cornish and Welsh, all fostered by the Church, kept alive centuries after their use had worn thin. But it was good to chop a land piecemeal, set up barriers

of language as well as class. 'Divide and rule' had long been the policy, unofficially at least, of Rome.

The *routiers* themselves were surrounded by a mass of legend. There had always been gangs of footpads in the Southwest, probably always would be; they smuggled, they stole, they looted the road trains. Usually, but not invariably, they stopped short at murder. Some years the hauliers suffered worse than others; Jesse could remember the *Lady Anne* limping home one black night with her steersman dead from a crossbow quarrel, half her train ablaze and old Eli swearing death and destruction. Troops from as far off as Sorviiodunum had combed the heath for days but it had been useless. The gang had dispersed; gone to their homes if Eli's theories had been correct, turned back into honest God-fearing citizens. There'd been nothing on the heath to find; the rumoured strongholds of the outlaws just didn't exist.

Jesse stoked again, shivering inside his coat. The *Anne* carried no guns; you didn't fight the *routiers* if they came, not if you wanted to stay alive. At least not by conventional methods; Eli had had his own ideas on the matter though he hadn't lived long enough to see them carried out. Jesse set his mouth. If they came, they came; but all they'd get from the firm of Strange they'd be welcome to keep. The business hadn't been built on softness; in this England, haulage wasn't a soft trade.

A mile or so ahead a brook, a tributary of the Frome, crossed the road. On this run the hauliers usually stopped there to replenish their tanks. There were no waterholes on the heath, the cost of making them would be prohibitive. Water standing in earth hollows would turn brackish and foul, unsafe for the boilers; the splashes would have to be concrete lined, and a job like that would set somebody back half a year's profits. Cement manufacture was controlled rigidly by Rome, its price prohibitive. The embargo was deliberate of course; the stuff was far too handy for the erection of quick strong-points. Over the years there had been enough revolts in the country to teach caution even to the Popes.

Jesse, watching ahead, saw the sheen of water or ice. His hand went to the reversing lever and the train brakes.

The *Anne* stopped on the crown of a little bridge. Its parapets bore solemn warnings about 'ponderous carriages' but few of the hauliers paid much attention to them after dark at least. He swung down and unstrapped the heavy armoured hose from the side of the boiler, slung its end over the bridge. Ice broke with a clatter. The waterlifts hissed noisily, steam pouring from their vents. A few minutes and the job was done. The *Anne* would have made Poole and beyond without trouble; but no haulier worth his salt ever felt truly secure with his tanks less than brimming full. Specially after dark, with the ever-present chance of attack. The steamer was ready now if needs be for a long, hard flight.

Jesse re-coiled the hose and took the running lamps out of the tender. Four of them, one for each side of the boiler, two for the front axle. He hung them in place, turning the valves over the carbide, lifting the front glasses to sniff for acetylene. The lamps threw clear white fans of light ahead and to each side, making the frost crystals on the road surface sparkle. Jesse moved off again. The cold was bitter; he guessed several degrees of frost already, and the worst of the night was still to come. This was the part of the journey where you started to think of the cold as a personal enemy. It caught at your throat, drove glassy claws into your back; it was a thing to be fought, continuously, with the body and brain. Cold could stun a man, freeze him on the footplate till his fire burned low and he lost steam and hadn't the sense to stoke. It had happened before; more than one haulier had lost his life like that on the road. It would happen again.

The *Lady Anne* bellowed steadily; the wind moaned in across the heath.

On the landward side, the houses and cottages of Poole huddled behind a massive rampart and ditch. Along the fortifications, cressets burned; their light was visible for miles across the waste ground. The *Anne* raised the line of twinkling sparks, closed with them slowly. In sight of the West Gate Jesse spun the brakewheel and swore. Stretching out from the walls, dimly visible in the torchlight, was a confusion of traffic; Burrows, Avelings,

Claytons, Fowlers, each loco with a massive train. Officials scurried about; steam plumed into the air; the many engines made a muted thundering. The *Lady Anne* slowed, jetting white clouds like exhaled breath, edged into the turmoil alongside a ten horse Fowler liveried in the colours of the Merchant Adventurers.

Jesse was fifty yards from the gates, and the jam looked like taking an hour or better to sort out. The air was full of din; the noise of the engines, shouts from the steersmen and drivers, the bawling of Town Marshals and traffic wardens. Bands of Pope's Angels wound between the massive wheels, chanting carols and holding up their cups for offerings. Jesse hailed a harassed-looking peeler. The sergeant grounded his halberd, looked back at the *Lady Anne's* load and grinned.

"Bishop Blaize's benison again, friend?"

Jesse grunted an affirmative; alongside, the Fowler let fly a deafening series of hoots.

"Belay that" roared the policeman. "What've ye got there that needs so much hurry?"

The driver, a little sparrow of a man muffled in scarf and greatcoat, spat a cigarette butt overboard. "Shell-fish for 'Is 'Oliness" he quipped. "They're burnin' Rome tonight . . ." The story of Pope Orlando dining on oysters while his mercenaries sacked Florence had already passed into legend.

"Any more of that" shouted the sergeant furiously, "and you'll find the gates shut in your face. You'll lie on the heath all night, and the *routiers* can have their pick of you. Now roll that pile of junk, *roll it I say . . .*"

A gap had opened ahead; the Fowler thundered contemptuously and moved into it. Jesse followed. An age of shunting and hooting and he was finally past the bottleneck, guiding his train down the long main street of Poole.

Strange and Sons maintained a bonded store on the quay, not far from the old Customs House. The *Anne* threaded her way to it, inching between piles of merchandise that had overflowed from loading bays. The docks were busy for so late in the season; Jesse passed a

Scottish collier, a big German freighter, a Frenchman; a Newworlder, an ex-slaver by her raking lines, a handsome Swedish clipper still defiantly under sail; and an old Dutch tramp, the *Groningen*, that he knew to be still equipped with the antiquated and curious mercury boilers. He swung his train eventually into the company warehouse, nearly an hour overdue.

The return load had already been made up; Jesse ditched the down-waggons thankfully, handed over the manifest to the firm's agent and backed onto the new haul. He saw again to the securing of the trail load, built steam and headed out. The cold was deep inside him now, the windows of the waterfront pubs tempting with their promise of warmth, drink and hot food; but tonight the *Anne* wouldn't lie in Poole. It was nearly eight of the clock by the time she reached the ramparts, and the press of traffic was gone. The gates were opened by a surly-faced sergeant; Jesse guided his train through to the open road. The moon was high now, riding a clear sky, and the cold was intense.

A long drag southwest, across the top of Poole harbour to where the Wareham turn branched left from the road to Durnovaria. Jesse coaxed the waggons round it. He gave the *Anne* her head, clocking twenty miles an hour on the open road. Then into Wareham, the awkward bend by the railway crossing; past the Black Bear with its monstrous carved sign and over the Frome where it ran into the sea, limning the northern boundary of Purbeck Island. After that the heaths again; Stoborough, Slepe, Middlebere, Norden, empty and vast, full of the droning wind. Finally a twinkle of light showed ahead, high off the road and to the right; the *Anne* thundered into Corvesgeat, the ancient pass through the Purbeck hills. Foursquare in the cutting and straddling the road, the great castle of Corfe squatted atop its mound, windows blazing light like eyes. My Lord of Purbeck must be in residence then, receiving his guests for Christmas.

The steamer circled the high flanks of the *motte*, climbed to the village beyond. She crossed the square, wheels and engine reflecting a hollow clamour from the front of the Greyhound Inn, climbed again through the

long main street to where the heath was waiting once more, flat and desolate, haunted by wind and stars.

The Swanage road. Jesse, doped by the cold, fought the idea that the *Anne* had been running through this void forever, fuming her breath away into blackness like some spirit cursed and bound in a frozen hell. He would have welcomed any sign of life, even of the *routiers*; but there was nothing. Just the endless bitterness of the wind, the darkness stretching out each side of the road. He swung his mitten hands, stamping on the footplate, turning to see the tall shoulders of the load swaying against the night, way back the faint reflection of the tail lamps. He'd long since given up cursing himself for an idiot. He should have laid up at Poole, moved out again with the dawn; he knew that well enough. But tonight he felt obscurely that he was not driving but being driven.

He valved water through the preheater, stoked, valved again. One day they'd swap these solid-burners for oil-fuelled machines. The units had been available for years now; but oil firing was still a theory in limbo, awaiting the Papal verdict. Might be a decision next year, or the year after; or maybe not at all. The ways of Mother Church were devious, not to be questioned by the herd.

Old Eli would have fitted oil burners and damned the priests black to their faces, but his drivers and steersmen would have balked at the excommunication that would certainly have followed. Strange and Sons had bowed the knee there, not for the first time and not for the last. Jesse found himself thinking about his father again while the *Anne* slogged upwards, back into the hills. It was odd; but now, he felt he could talk to the old man. Now he could explain his hopes, his fears . . . Only now was too late; because Eli was dead and gone, six feet of Dorset muck on his chest. Was that the way of the world? Did people always feel they could talk, and talk, when it was just that bit too late?

The big mason's yard outside Long Tun Matravers. The piles of stone thrust up, dimly visible in the light of the steamer's lamps, breaking at last the deadly emptiness of the heath. Jesse hooted a warning; the voice of the

Burrell rushed across the housetops, mournful and huge. The place was deserted, like a town of the dead. On the right the King's Head showed dim lights ; its sign creaked uneasily, rocking in the wind. The *Anne's* wheels hit cobbles, slewed ; Jesse spun the brakes on, snapping back the reversing lever to cut the power from the pistons. The frost had gathered thickly here, in places the road was like glass. At the crest of the hill into Swanage he twisted the control that locked his differentials. The loco steadied and edged down, groping for her haven. The wind skirled, lifting a spray of snow crystals across her headlights.

The roofs of the little town seemed to cluster under their mantle of frost. Jesse hooted again, the sound enormous between the houses. A gang of kids appeared from somewhere, ran yelling alongside the train. Ahead was a crossroads, and the yellow lamps on the front of the George Hotel. Jesse aimed the loco for the yard entrance, edged forward. The smokestack brushed the passageway overhead. Here was where he needed a mate ; the steam from the Burrell, blowing back in the confined space, obscured his vision. The children had vanished ; he gentled the reversing lever, easing in. The exhaust beats thrashed back from the walls then the *Anne* was clear, rumbling across the yard. The place had been enlarged years back to take the road trains ; Jesse pulled across between a Garrett and a six horse Clayton and Shuttleworth, neutralized the reversing lever and closed the regulator. The pounding stopped at last.

The haulier rubbed his face and stretched. The shoulders of his coat were beaded with ice ; he brushed at it and got down stiffly, shoved the scotches under the engine's wheels, valved off her lamps. The hotel yard was deserted, the wind booming in the surrounding roofs ; the boiler of the loco seethed gently. Jesse blew her excess steam, banked his fire and shut the dampers, stood on the front axle to set a bucket upside down atop the chimney. The *Anne* would lie the night now safely. He stood back and looked at the bulk of her still radiating

warmth, the faint glint of light from round the ash pan. He took his haversack from the cab and walked to the George to check in.

They showed him his room and left him. He used the loo, washed his face and hands and left the Hotel. A few yards down the street the windows of a pub glowed crimson, light seeping through the drawn curtains. Its sign proclaimed it the Mermaid Inn. He trudged down the alley that ran alongside the bars. The back room was full of talk, the air thick with the fumes of tobacco. The Mermaid was a hauliers' pub; Jesse saw half a score of men he knew, Tom Skinner from Powerstock, Jeff Holroyd from Wey Mouth, two of old Serjeantson's boys. On the road, news travels fast; they crowded round him, talking against each other. He grunted answers, pushing his way to the bar. Yes, his father had had a sudden haemorrhage; no, he hadn't lived long after it. Five of the clock the next afternoon . . . He pulled his coat open to reach his wallet, gave his order, took the pint and the double Scotch. A poker, thrust glowing into the tankard, mulled the ale; creamy froth spilled down the sides of the pot. The spirit burned Jesse's throat, made his eyes sting. He was fresh off the road; the others made room for him as he crouched knees apart in front of the fire. He swigged at the pint feeling heat invade his crotch, move into his stomach. Somehow his mind could still hear the pounding of the Burrell, the vibration of her wheel was still in his fingers. Time later for talk and questioning; first the warmth. A man had to be warm.

She managed somehow to cross and stand behind him, spoke before he knew she was there. He stopped chafing his hands and straightened awkwardly, conscious now of height and bulk.

"Hello, Jesse . . ."

Did she know? The thought always came. All those years back when he'd named the Burrell; she'd been a gawky stripling then, all legs and eyes, but she was the Lady he'd meant. She'd been the ghost that haunted him those hot, adolescent nights, trailing her scent among the scents of the garden flowers. He'd been on the steamer when Eli took that monstrous bet, sat and cried like a

fool because when the Burrell breastfed the last slope she wasn't winning fifty golden guineas for his father, she was panting out the glory of Anne. But Anne wasn't a stripling now, not any more; the lamps put bright highlights on her brown hair, her eyes flickered at him, the mouth quirked . . .

He grunted at her. "Evenin', Anne . . ."

She brought him his meal, set a corner table, sat with him a while as he ate. That made his breath tighten in his throat; he had to force himself to remember it meant nothing. After all you don't have a father die every week of your life. She wore a chunky costume ring with a bright blue stone; she had a habit of turning it restlessly between her fingers as she talked. The fingers were thin with flat, polished nails, the hands wide across the knuckles like the hands of a boy. He watched her hands now touching her hair, drumming at the table, stroking the ash of a cigarette sideways into a saucer. He could imagine them sweeping, dusting, cleaning, as well as doing the other things, the secret things women must do to themselves.

She asked him what he'd brought down. She always asked that. He said "Lady" briefly, using the jargon of the hauliers. Wondering again if she ever watched the Burrell, if she knew she was the Lady *Anne*; and whether it would matter to her if she did. Then she brought him another drink and said it was on the house, told him she must go back to the bar now and that she'd see him again.

He watched her through the smoke, laughing with the men. She had an odd laugh, a kind of flat chortle that drew back the top lip and showed the teeth while the eyes watched and mocked. She was a good barmaid, was Anne; her father was an old haulier, he'd run the house this twenty years. His wife had died a couple of seasons back, the other daughters had married and moved out but Anne had stayed. She knew a soft touch when she saw one; leastways that was the talk among the hauliers. But that was crazy, running a pub wasn't an easy life. The long hours seven days a week, the polishing and scrubbing, mending and sewing and cooking . . . though they did have a woman in the mornings for the rough

work, Jesse knew that like he knew most other things about his Anne. He knew her shoe size, and that her birthday was in May; he knew she was twenty-four inches round the waist and that she liked Chanel and had a dog called Joe. And he knew she'd sworn never to marry; she'd said running the *Mermaid* had taught her as much about men as she wanted to learn, five thousand down on the counter would buy her services but nothing else. She'd never met anybody that could raise the half of that, the ban was impossible. But maybe she hadn't said it at all; the village air swam with gossip, and amongst themselves the hauliers yacked like washerwomen . . .

Jesse pushed his plate away. Abruptly he felt the rising of a black self-contempt. Anne was the reason for nearly everything; she was why he'd detoured miles out of his way, pulled his train to Swanage for a couple of boxes of iced fish that wouldn't repay the hauling back. Well, he'd wanted to see her and he'd seen her. She'd talked to him, sat by him; she wouldn't come to him again. Now he could go. He remembered again the raw sides of a grave, the spattering of earth on Eli's coffin. That was what waited for him, for all God's so-called children; only he'd wait for his death alone. He wanted to drink now, wash out the image in a warm brown haze of alcohol. But not here, not here . . . He headed for the door.

He collided with the stranger, growled an apology, walked on. He felt his arm caught; he turned back, stared into liquid brown eyes set in a straight-nosed, rakishly handsome face. "No" said the newcomer. "No, I don't believe it. By all tha's unholy, *Jesse Strange* . . ."

For a moment the other's jaunty fringe of beard baffled him; then Jesse started to grin in spite of himself. "Colin" he said slowly. "Col de la Haye . . ."

Col brought his other arm round to grip Jesse's biceps. "Well, Hell" he said. "Jesse, you're lookin' well. This calls f'r a drink, ol' boy. What you bin doin' with yourself? Hell, you're lookin' well . . ."

They leaned in a corner of the bar, full pints in front of them. "God damn" said de la Haye for the fourth or fifth time. "Well God damn, Jesse, tha's lousy luck. Los"

your ol' man, eh? tha's rotten . . ." He lifted his tankard. "To you, ol' Jesse. Happier days . . ."

At college in Sherborne Jesse and Col had been fast friends. It had been the attraction of opposites; Jesse slow-talking, studious and quiet, de la Haye the rake, the man-about-town. Col was the son of a west country businessman, a feminist and rogue at large; his tutors had always sworn that like the Fielding character he'd been born to be hanged. After College Jesse had lost touch with him. He'd heard vaguely Col had given up the family business; importing and warehousing just hadn't been fast enough for him. He'd apparently spent a time as a strolling *jongleur*, working on a book of ballads that had never got written, had six months on the boards in Londinium before being invalided home the victim of a brawl in a brothel. "A'd show you the scar" said Col, grinning hideously, "but it's a bit bloody awkward in mixed comp'ny, ol' boy . . ." He'd later become of all things, a haulier for a firm in Isca. That hadn't lasted long; halfway through his first week he'd howled into Bristol with an eight horse Clayton and Shuttleworth, unreeled his hose and drained the Corporation horsetrough in the town centre before the peelers ran him in. The Clayton hadn't quite exploded but it had been a near go. He'd tried again, up in Aquae Sulis where he wasn't so well known; that time he lasted six months before a broken gauge glass stripped most of the skin from his ankles. De la Haye moved on, seeking as he put it 'less lethal employment.' Jesse chuckled and shook his head. "So what be 'ee doing' now?"

The insolent eyes laughed back at him. "A' trade" said Col breezily. "A' take what comes; a li'l here, li'l there . . . Times are hard, we must all live how we can. Drink up ol' Jesse, the next one's mine . . ."

They chewed over old times while Anne served up pints and took the money, raising her eyebrows at Col. The night de la Haye, pot-valiant, had sworn to strip his professor's cherished walnut tree . . . "A' remember that like it was yes'day" said Col happily. "Lovely ol' moon there was, bright as day . . ." Jesse had held the ladder

while Col climbed; but before he reached the branches the tree was shaken as if by a hurricane. "Nuts comin' down like bloody hailstones" chortled Col. "Y'remember Jesse, y'must remember . . . An' there was that . . . that bloody ol' rogue of a peeler Toby Warrilow sittin' up there with his big ol' boots stuck out, shakin' the Hell out of that bloody tree . . ." For weeks after that, even de la Haye had been able to do nothing wrong in the eyes of the law; and a whole dormitory had gorged themselves on walnuts for nearly a month.

There'd been the business of the two nuns stolen from Sherborne Convent; they'd tried to pin that on de la Haye and hadn't quite managed it, but it had been an open secret who was responsible. Girls in Holy Orders had been removed odd times before, but only Col would have taken two at once. And the affair of the Poet and Peasant. The landlord of that inn, thanks to some personal quirk, kept a large ape chained in the stables; Col, evicted after a singularly rowdy night, had managed to slit the creature's collar. The God-forsaken animal caused troubles and panics for a month; men went armed, women stayed indoors. The thing had finally been shot by a militiaman who caught it in his room drinking a bowl of soup.

"So what you goin' to do now?" asked de la Haye, swigging back his sixth or seventh beer. "Is your firm now, no?"

"Aye." Jesse brooded, hands clasped, chin touching his knuckles. "Goin' to run it, I guess . . ."

Col draped an arm around his shoulders. "You be OK" he said. "You be OK pal, why so sad? Hey, tell you what. You get a li'l girl now, you be all right then. Tha's what you need, ol' Jesse; a' know the signs." He punched his friend in the ribs and roared with laughter. "Keep you warm nights better'n a stack of extra blankets. An' stop you gettin' fat, no?"

Jesse looked faintly startled. "Dunno 'bout *that* . . ."

"Ah, Hell" said de la Haye. "Tha's the thing though. Ah, there's nothin' like it. Mmmmyowwhh . . ." He wagged his hips, shut his eyes, drew shapes with his hands, contrived to look rapturous and lascivious at the same

time. "Is no trouble now, ol' Jesse" he said. "You loaded now, you know that? Hell man, you're *eligible* . . . They come runnin' when they hear, you have to fight 'em off with a . . . a pushpole couplin', no?" He dissolved again in merriment.

Eleven of the clock came round far too quickly. Jesse struggled into his coat, followed Col up the alley beside the pub. It was only when the cold air hit him he realized how stoned he was. He stumbled against de la Haye, then ran into the wall. They reeled along the street laughing, parted company finally at the George. Col, roaring out promises, vanished into the night.

Jesse leaned against the rear wheel of the *Anne*, head laid back on its struts, and felt the beer fume in his brain. When he closed his eyes a slow movement began; the ground seemed to tilt forward and back under his feet. Man, but that last hour had been good. It had been College all over again; he chuckled helplessly, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. De la Haye was a no-good bastard all right but a nice guy, nice guy . . . Jesse opened his eyes blearily, looked up at the road train. Then he moved carefully, hand over hand along the engine, to test her boiler temperature with his palm. He hauled himself to the footplate, opened the firebox doors, spread coal, checked the dampers and watergauge. Everything secure. He tacked across the yard, feeling the odd snow crystals sting his face.

He fiddled with his key in the lock, swung the door open. His room was black and icily cold. He lit the single lantern, left its glass ajar. The candle flame shivered in a draught. He dropped across the bed heavily, lay watching the one point of yellow light sway forward and back. Best get some sleep, make an early start tomorrow . . . His haversack lay where he'd slung it on the chair but he lacked the strength of will to unpack it now. He shut his eyes.

Almost instantly the images began to swirl. Somewhere in his head the Burrell was pounding; he flexed his hands, feeling the wheelrim thrill between them. That was how the locos got you, after a while; throbbing and throbbing hour on hour till the noise became a part of you, got

in the blood and brain so you couldn't live without it. Up at dawn, out on the road, driving till you couldn't stop ; Londinium, Aquae Sulis, Isca ; stone from the Purbeck quarries, coal from Kimmeridge, wool and grain and worsted, flour and wine, candlesticks, Madonnas, shovels, butter scoops, powder and shot, gold, lead, tin ; out on contract to the Army, the Church . . . Cylinder cocks, dampers, regulator, reversing lever ; the high iron shaking of the footplate . . .

He moved restlessly, muttering. The colours in his brain grew sharper. Maroon and gold of livery, red saliva on his father's chin, flowers bright against fresh earth ; steam and lamplight, flames, the hard sky clamped against the hills.

His mind toyed with memories of Col, hearing sentences, hearing him laugh ; the little intake of breath, squeaky and distinctive, then the sharp machinegun barking while he screwed his eyes shut and hunched his shoulders, pounded with his fist on the counter. Col had promised to look him up in Durnovaria, reeled away shouting he wouldn't forget. But he would forget ; he'd lose himself, get immersed with some woman, forget the whole business, forget the meeting. Because Col wasn't like Jesse. No planning and waiting for de la Haye, no careful working out of odds ; he lived for the moment, vividly. He would never change.

The locos thundered, cranks whirling, crossheads dipping, brass gleaming and tinkling in the wind.

Jesse half sat up, shaking his head. The lamp burned steady now, its flame thin and tall, just vibrating slightly at the tip. The wind boomed, carrying with it the striking of a church clock. He listened, counting. Twelve strokes. He frowned. He'd slept, and dreamed ; he'd thought it was nearly dawn. But the long, hard night had barely begun . . . He lay back again with a grunt, feeling drunk but queerly wide awake. He couldn't take his beer any more ; he'd had the horrors. Maybe there were more to come.

He started revolving idly the things de la Haye had said. The crack about getting a woman. That was crazy, typical of Col. No trouble maybe for him, but for Jesse

there had only ever been one little girl. And she was out of reach.

His mind, spinning, seemed to check and stop quite still. No, he told himself irritably, forget it. You've got troubles enough, let it go . . . but a part of him stubbornly refused to obey. It turned the pages of mental ledgers, added, subtracted, thrust the totals insistently into his consciousness. He swore, damning de la Haye. The idea, once implanted, wouldn't leave him. It would haunt him now for weeks, maybe years.

He gave himself up, luxuriously, to dreaming. She knew all about him, that was certain; women knew such things unfailingly. He'd given himself away a hundred times, a thousand; little things, a look, a gesture, a word, were all it needed. He'd kissed her once, years back. Only the one time; that was maybe why it had stayed so sharp and bright in his mind, why he could still relive it. It had been a nearly accidental thing; a New Year's Eve, the pub bright and noisy, a score or more of locals seeing the new season in. The church clock striking, the same clock that marked the hours now, doors in the village street popping undone, folk eating mincepies and drinking wine, shouting to each other across the dark, kissing; and she'd put down the tray she was holding, watching him. "Let's not be left out, Jesse" she said. "Us too . . ."

He remembered the sudden thumping of his heart, like the fussing of a loco when her driver gives her steam. She'd turned her face up to him, he'd seen the lips parting; then she was pushing hard, using her tongue, making a little noise deep in her throat. He wondered if she made the sound every time automatically, like a cat purring when you rubbed its fur. And somehow too she'd guided his hand to her breast; it lay cupped there, hot under her dress, burning his palm. He'd tightened his arm across her back then, pulling her onto her toes till she wriggled away gasping. "Whoosh" she said. "Well done, Jesse. Ouch . . . well done . . ." Laughing at him again, patting her hair; and all past dreams and future visions had met in one melting point of Time.

He remembered how he'd stoked the loco all the long

haul back, tireless, while the wind sang and her wheels crashed through a glowing landscape of jewels. The images were back now; he saw Anne at a thousand sweet moments, putting, touching, undressing, laughing. And he remembered, suddenly, a hauliers' wedding; the ill-fated marriage of his brother Micah to a girl from Sturminster Newton. The engines burnished to their canopies, beribbonned and flag draped, each separate plank of their flatbed trailers gleaming white and scoured; drifts of confetti like bright-coloured snow, the priest standing laughing with his glass of wine, old Eli, hair plastered miraculously flat, incongruous white collar clamped round his neck, beaming and red-faced, waving from the footplate of the *Anne* a quart pot of beer. Then equally abruptly, the scene was gone; and Eli, in his Sunday suit, with his pewter mug and his polished hair, was whirled away into a dark space of wind.

"*Father . . . !*"

Jesse sat up, panting. The little room showed dim, shadows flicking as the candle flame guttered. Outside, the clock chimed twelve fifteen. He stayed still, squatting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. No weddings for him, no gayness. Tomorrow he must go back to a dark and still mourning house; to his father's unsolved worries and the family business and the same ancient, dreary round . . .

In the darkness, the image of Anne danced like a solitary spark.

He was horrified at what his body was doing. His feet found the flight of wooden stairs, stumbled down them. He felt the cold air in the yard bite at his face. He tried to reason with himself but it seemed his legs would no longer obey him. He felt a sudden gladness, a lightening. You didn't stand the pain of an aching tooth for ever; you took yourself to the barber, changed the nagging for a worse quick agony then for blessed peace. He'd stood this long enough; now it too was to be finished. Instantly, with no more waiting. He told himself, ten years of hoping and dreaming, of wanting dumbly like an animal, that has to count. He asked himself, what had he expected her to do? She wouldn't

come running to him pleading, throwing herself across his feet, women weren't made like that, she had her dignity too . . . He tried to remember when the gulf between him and Anne had been fixed. He told himself, never; by no token, no word . . . He'd never given her a chance, what if she'd been waiting too all these years? Just waiting to be *asked* . . . It had to be true. He knew, glowingly, it was true. As he tacked along the street, he started to sing.

The watchman loomed from a doorway, a darker shadow, gripping a halberd short.

"You all right, sir?"

The voice, penetrating as if from a distance, brought Jesse up short. He gulped, nodded, grinned. "Yeah. Yeah, sure . . ." He jerked a thumb behind him. "Brought a . . . train down. Strange, Durnovaria . . ."

The man stood back. His attitude said plainly enough 'One o' they beggars . . .' He said gruffly "Best get along then sir, don't want to have to run 'ee in. 'Tis well past twelve o' the clock, y'know . . ."

"On m'way, officer" said Jesse. "On m'way . . ." A dozen steps along the street he turned back. "Officer . . . you m-married?"

The voice was uncompromising. "Get along now sir . . ." Its owner vanished in blackness.

The little town, asleep. Frost glinting on the rooftops, puddles in the road ruts frozen to iron, houses shuttered blind. Somewhere an owl called; or was it the noise of a far-off engine, out there somewhere on the road . . . The *Mermaid* was silent, no lights showing. Jesse hammered at the door. Nothing. He knocked louder. A light flickered on across the street. He started to sob for breath. He'd done it all wrong, she wouldn't open. They'd call the watch instead . . . But she'd know, she'd know who was knocking, women always knew. He beat at the wood, terrified. "Anne . . ."

A shifting glint of yellow; then the door opened with a suddenness that sent him sprawling. He straightened up still breathing hard, trying to focus his eyes. She was standing holding a wrap across her throat, hair tousled. She held a lamp high; then, "You . . .!" she shut the

door with a thump, snatched the bolt across and turned to face him. She said in a low, furious voice "What the Devil do you think you're doing?"

He backed up. "I . . ." he said, "I . . ." He saw her face change. "Jesse" she said, "what's wrong? Are you hurt, what happened?"

"I . . . sorry" he said. "Had to see you, Anne. Couldn't leave it no more . . ."

"*Hush*" she said. Hissed. "You'll wake my father, if you haven't done it already. *What are you talking about?*"

He leaned on the wall, trying to stop the spinning in his head. "Five thousand" he said thickly. "It's . . . nothing, Anne. Not any more. Anne I'm . . . rich, God help me. It don't matter no more . . ."

"*What?*"

"On the roads" he said desperately. "The . . . hauliers' talk. They said you wanted five thousand. Anne, I can do ten . . ."

A dawning comprehension. And for God's sake, she was starting to laugh . . . "Jesse Strange" she said, shaking her head. "What are you trying to say?"

And it was out, at last. "I love you, Anne" he said simply. "Reckon I always have. And I . . . want you to be my wife."

She stopped smiling then, stood quite still and let her eyes close as if suddenly she was very tired. Then she reached forward quietly and took his hand. "Come on" she said. "Just for a little while. Come and sit down."

In the back bar the firelight was dying. She sat by the hearth curled like a cat, watching him, her eyes big in the dimness; and Jesse talked. He told her everything, things he'd never found the words for before, things he'd never imagined himself speaking. How he'd wanted her, and hoped, and known it was no use; how he'd waited so many years he'd nearly forgotten a time when she hadn't filled his mind. She stayed still, holding his fingers, stroking the back of his hand with her thumb, thinking and brooding. He told her how she'd be mistress of the house and have the gardens, the orchards of cherry plums, the rose terraces, the servants, her drawing account in the

bank ; how she'd have nothing to do any more ever but be Anne Strange, his wife.

The silence lengthened when he'd finished, till the ticking of the big bar clock sounded loud. She stirred her foot in the warmth of the ashes, wriggling the toes ; he gripped her instep softly, spanning it with finger and thumb. "I do love you, Anne" he said. "I truly do . . ."

She still stayed quiet, staring at nothing visible, eyes opaque. She'd let the shawl fall off her shoulders ; he could see her breasts, the nipples pushing against the flimsiness of the nightdress. She frowned, pursed her mouth, looked back at him. "Jesse" she said, "when I've finished talking, will you do something for me? Will you promise?"

Quite suddenly, he was no longer drunk. The whirling and the warmth faded, leaving him shivering. Somewhere he was sure the loco hooted again. "Yes, Anne" he said. "If that's what you want."

She came and sat by him. "Move up" she whispered. "You're taking all the room." She saw the shivering ; she put her hand inside his jacket, rubbed softly. "Stop it" she said. "Don't do that, Jesse. Please . . ."

The spasm passed ; she pulled her arm back, flicked at the shawl, gathered her dress round her knees. "When I've said what I'm going to, will you promise to go away? Very quietly, and not . . . make trouble for me? Please, Jesse. I did let you in . . ."

"That's all right" he said. "Don't worry Anne, that's all right." His voice, talking, sounded like the voice of a stranger. He didn't want to hear what she had to say : but listening to it meant he could stay close just a little longer. He felt suddenly he knew what it would be like to be given a cigarette just before you were hanged ; how every puff would mean another second's life.

She twined her fingers together, looked down at the carpet. "I . . . want to get this just right" she said. "I want to . . . say it properly. Jesse, because I don't want to hurt you. I . . . like you too much for that."

"I . . . knew about it of course, I've known all the time. That was why I let you in. Because I . . . like you very much, Jesse, and I didn't want to hurt. And

now you see I've . . . trusted you, so you musn't let me down. I can't marry you, Jesse, because I don't love you. I never will. Can you understand that? It's terribly hard knowing . . . well, how you feel and all that and still having to say it to you but I've got to because it just wouldn't work. I . . . knew this was going to happen sometime, I used to lie awake at night thinking about it, thinking all about you, honestly I did, but it wasn't any good. It just . . . wouldn't work, that's all. So . . . no. I'm terribly sorry but . . . no."

*How can a man balance his life on a dream, how can he be such a fool? How can he live, when the dream gets knocked apart . . .*

She saw his face alter and reached for his hand again. "Jesse, please . . . I . . . think you've been terribly sweet waiting all this time and I . . . know about the money, I know why you said that, I know you just wanted to give me a . . . good life. It was terribly sweet of you to think like that about me and I . . . know you'd do it. But it just wouldn't work . . . Oh God, isn't this awful . . ."

*You try to wake from what you know is a dream, and you can't. Because you're awake already, this is the dream they call life . . . You move in the dream and talk, even when something inside you wants to twist and die.* He rubbed her knee, feeling the firm smoothness. "Anne" he said. "I don't want you to rush into anything. Look, in a couple of months I shall be comin' back through . . ."

She bit her lip. "I knew you were . . . going to say that as well. But . . . no, Jesse. It isn't any use thinking about it. I've tried to and it wouldn't work. I don't want to . . . have to go through this again and hurt you all over another time. Please don't ask me again. Ever."

He thought dully, he couldn't buy her. Couldn't win her, and couldn't buy. Because he wasn't man enough, and that was the simple truth. Just not quite what she wanted. That was what he'd known all along, deep down, but he'd never faced it; he'd kissed his pillows nights, and whispered love for Anne, because he hadn't dared bring the truth into the light. And now he'd got the rest of the time to try and forget . . . this.

She was still watching him. She said "Please understand . . ."

And he felt better. God preserve him, some weight seemed to shift suddenly and let him talk "Anne" he said, "this sounds damn stupid, don't know how to say it . . ."

"Try . . ."

He said "I don't want to . . . hold you down. It's . . . selfish, like somehow having a . . . bird in a cage, owning it . . . Only I didn't think on it that way before. Reckon I . . . really love you because I don't want that to happen to you. I wouldn't do anything to hurt. Don't you worry, Anne, it'll be all right. It'll be all right now. Reckon I'll just . . . well, get out o' your way like . . ."

She put a hand to her head. "God this is awful, I knew it would happen . . . Jesse don't just . . . well, vanish. You know, go off an' . . . never come back. You see I . . . like you so very much, as a friend, I should feel terrible if you did that. Can't things be like they . . . were before, I mean can't you just sort of . . . come in and see me, like you used to? Don't go right away, please . . ."

*Even that, he thought. God, I'll do even that . . .*

She stood up. "And now go. Please . . ."

He nodded, dumbly. "It'll be all right . . ."

"Jesse" she said. "I don't want to . . . get in any deeper. But—" She kissed him, quickly. There was no feeling this time. No fire. He stood until she let him go; then he walked quickly to the door.

He heard, dimly, his boots ringing on the street. Somewhere a long way off from him was a vague sighing, a susurration; could have been the blood in his ears, could have been the sea. The house doorways and the dark-socketed windows seemed to lurch toward him of their own accord, fall away behind. He felt as a ghost might feel grappling with the concept of death, trying to assimilate an idea too big for its consciousness. There was no Anne now, not any more. No Anne. Now he must leave the grown-up world where people married and loved and mated and mattered to each other, go back for all time to his child's universe of oil and steel. And

the days would come, and the days would go, till on one of them he would die . . .

He crossed the road outside the George ; then he was walking under the yard entrance, climbing the stairs, opening the door of his room. Putting out the light, smelling Goody Thompson's fresh-sour sheets.

The bed felt cold as a tomb.

The fishwives woke him, hawking their wares through the streets. Somewhere there was a clanking of milk churns ; voices crisped in the cold air of the yard. He lay still, face down, and there was an empty time before the cold new fall of grief. He remembered he was dead ; he got up and dressed, not feeling the icy air on his body. He washed, shaved the bluechinned face of a stranger, went out to the Burrell. Her livery glowed in weak sunlight, topped by a thin bright icing of snow. He felt no desire to eat ; he went down to the quay instead, haggled absentmindedly for the fish he was going to buy, arranged for its delivery to the George. He saw the boxes stowed in time for late service at the church, stayed on for confession. He didn't go near the *Mermaid* ; he wanted nothing now but to leave, get back on the road. He checked the *Lady Anne* again, polished her nameplates, hubs, flywheel boss. Then he remembered seeing something in a shop window, something he'd intended to buy ; a little tableau, the Virgin, Joseph, the Shepherds kneeling, the Christ-child in the manger. He knocked up the storekeeper, bought it and had it packed ; his mother set great store by such things, and it would look well on the sideboard over Christmas.

By then it was lunchtime. He made himself eat, swallowing food that tasted like string. He nearly paid his bill before he remembered. Now, it went on account ; the account of Strange and Sons, of Dorset. After the meal he went to one of the bars of the George, drank to try and wash the sour taste from his mouth. Subconsciously, he found himself waiting ; for footsteps, a remembered voice, some message from Anne to tell him not to go, she'd changed her mind. It was a bad state of

mind to get into but he couldn't help himself. No message came.

It was nearly three of the clock before he walked out to the Burrell and built steam. He uncoupled the *Anne* and turned her, shackled the load to the pushpole lug and backed it into the road. A difficult feat but he did it without thinking. He disconnected the loco, brought her round again, hooked on, shoved the reversing lever forward and inched open on the regulator. The rumbling of the wheels started at last. He knew once clear of Purbeck he wouldn't come back. Couldn't, despite his promise. He'd send Tim or one of the others; the thing he had inside him wouldn't stay dead, if he saw her again it would have to be killed all over. And once was more than enough.

He had to pass the pub. The chimney smoked but there was no other sign of life. The train crashed behind him, thunderously obedient. Fifty yards on he used the whistle, over and again, woke *Anne's* huge iron voice, filled the street with steam. Childish, but he couldn't stop himself. Then he was clear, Swanage dropping away behind as he climbed toward the heath. He built up speed. He was late; in that other world he seemed to have left so long ago, a man called Dickon would be worrying.

Way off on the left a semaphore stood stark against the sky. He hooted to it, the two pips followed by the long call that all the hauliers used. For a moment the thing stayed dead; then he saw the arms flip an acknowledgement. Out there he knew Zeiss glasses would be trained on the Burrell. The Guildsmen had answered; soon a message would be streaking north along the little local towers. *The Lady Anne, Locomotive, Strange and Sons, Durnovaria; out of Swanage routed for Corvesgeat, fifteen thirty hours. All well . . .*

Night came quickly; night, and the burning frost. Jesse swung west well before Wareham, cutting straight across the heath. The Burrell thundered steadily, gripping the road with her seven-foot drive wheels, leaving thin wraiths of steam behind her in the dark. He stopped once to fill his tanks and light the lamps, then pushed on again into the heathland. A light mist or frost smoke was

forming now; it clung to the hollows of the rough ground, glowing oddly in the light from the sidelamps. The wind soothed and threatened. North of the Purbecks, off the narrow coastal strip, the winter could strike quick and hard; come morning the heath could be impassable, the trackways lost under two feet or more of snow.

An hour out from Swanage, and the *Anne* still singing her tireless song of power. Jesse thought, blearily, that she at least kept faith. The semaphores had lost her now in the dark; there would be no more messages till she made her base. He could imagine old Dickon standing at the yard gate under the flaring cressets, worried, cocking his head to catch the beating of an exhaust miles away. The loco passed through Wool. Soon be home, now; home, to whatever comfort remained . . .

The boarder took him nearly by surprise. The train had slowed near the crest of a rise when the man ran alongside, lunged for the footplate step. Jesse heard the scrape of a shoe on the road; some sixth sense warned him of movement in the darkness. The shovel was up, swinging for the stranger's head, before it was checked by an agonised yelp. "Hey ol' boy, don' you know your friends?"

Jesse, half off balance, grunted and grabbed at the steering "Col . . . What the Hell are you doin' here?"

De la Haye, still breathing hard, grinned at him in the reflection of the sidelights. "Jus' a fellow traveller, my friend. Happy to see you come along there, I tell you. Had a li'l bit of trouble, thought a'd have to spend the night on the bloody heath . . ."

"What trouble?"

"Oh, I was ridin' out to a place a' know" said de la Haye. "Place out by Culliford, li'l farm. Christmas with friends. Nice daughters. Hey Jesse, you know?" He punched Jesse's arm, started to laugh. Jesse set his mouth. "What happened to your horse?"

"Bloody thing foundered, broke its leg."

"Where?"

"On the road back there" said de la Haye carelessly. "A' cut its throat an' rolled it in a ditch. Din' want the damn *routiers* spottin' it, gettin' on my tail . . ." He

blew his hands, held them out to the firebox, shivered dramatically inside his sheepskin coat. "Damn cold Jesse, cold as a bitch . . . How far you go?"

"Home. Durnovaria."

De la Haye peered at him. "Hey, you don' sound good. You sick ol' Jesse?"

"No."

Col shook his arm insistently. "Whassamatier, ol' pal? Anythin' a friend can do to help?"

Jesse ignored him, eyes searching the road ahead. De la Haye bellowed suddenly with laughter. "Was the beer. The beer, no? Ol' Jesse, your stomach has shrunk!" He held up a clenched fist. "Like the stomach of a li'l baby, no? Not the old Jesse any more; ah, life is Hell . . ."

Jesse glanced down at the gauge, turned the bellytank cocks, heard water splash on the road, touched the injector controls, saw the burst of steam as the lifts fed the boiler. The pounding didn't change its beat. He said steadily "Reckon it must have bin the beer that done it. Reckon I might go on the waggon. Gettin' old."

De la Haye peered at him again, intently. "Jesse" he said. "You got problems, my son. You got troubles. What gives? C'mon, spill . . ."

That damnable intuition hadn't left him then. He'd had it right through College; seemed somehow to know what you were thinking nearly as soon as it came into your head. It was Col's big weapon; he used it to have his way with women. Jesse laughed bitterly; and suddenly the story was coming out. He didn't want to tell it; but he did, down to the last word. Once started, he couldn't stop.

Col heard him in silence; then he started to shake. The shaking was laughter. He leaned back against the cab side, holding onto a stanchion. "Jesse, Jesse you are a lad. Christ, you never change . . . Oh, you bloody Saxon . . ." He went off into fresh peals, wiped his eyes. "So . . . so she show you her pretty li'l scut, eh? Jesse, you are a lad; when will you learn? What, you go to her with . . . with this . . ." He banged the *Anne's* horn-plate. "An' your face so earnest an' black, oh Jesse a'

can see that face of yours. Man, she don' want your great iron *destrier*. Christ above, no . . . But a' . . . a' tell you what you do . . ."

Jesse turned down the corners of his lips. "Why don't you just *shut up* . . ."

De la Haye shook his arm. "Nah, listen. Don' get mad, listen. You . . . woo her, Jesse; she like that, that one. You know? Get the ol' glad rags on man, get a butterfly car, mak' its wintgs of cloth of gold. She like that . . . Only don' stand no shovin', ol' Jesse. An' don' ask her nothin', not no more. You tell her what you want, say you goin' to get it . . . Pay for your beer with a golden guinea, tell her you'll tak' the change upstairs, no? She's worth it Jesse, she's worth havin' is that one. Oh but she's nice . . ."

"Go to Hell . . ."

"You don' want her?" De la Haye looked hurt. "A' jus' try to help, ol' pal . . . You los' interest now?"

"Yeah" said Jesse. "I lost interest."

"Ahhh . . ." Col sighed. "Ah, but is a shame. Young love all blighted . . . Tell you what though." He brightened. "You given me a great idea, ol' Jesse. You don' want her, a' have her myself. OK?"

*When you hear the wail that means your father's dead your hands go on wiping down a crosshead guide. When the world turns red and flashes, and drums roll inside your skull, your eyes watch ahead at the road, your fingers stay quiet on the wheel.* Jesse heard his own voice speak dryly. "You're a lying bastard Col, you always were. She wouldn't fall for you . . ."

Col snapped his fingers, danced on the footplate. "Man, a' got it halfway made. Oh but she's nice . . . Those li'l eyes, they were flashin' a bit las' night, no? Is easy man, easy . . . A' tell you what, a' bet she be sadistic in bed. But nice, ahhh, *nice* . . ." His gestures somehow suggested rapture. "I tak' her five ways in a night" he said. "An' send you proof. OK?"

*Maybe he doesn't mean it. Maybe he's lying. But he isn't. I know Col; and Col doesn't lie. Not about this. What he says he'll do, he'll do . . .* Jesse grinned, just with his teeth. "You do that, Col. Break her in. Then I take her off you. OK?"

De la Haye laughed and gripped his shoulder. "Jesse, you are a lad. Eh . . . ? Eh . . . ?"

A light flashed briefly, ahead and to the right, way out on the heathland. Col spun round, stared at where it had been, looked back to Jesse. "You see that?"

Grimly. "I saw."

De la Haye looked round the footplate nervously. "You got a gun?"

"Why?"

"The bloody light. The *routiers* . . ."

"You don't fight the *routiers* with a gun."

Col shook his head. "Man, I hope you know what you're doin' . . ."

Jesse wrenched at the firebox doors, letting out a blaze of light and heat. "Stoke . . ."

"What?"

"Stoke!"

"OK man" said de la Haye. "All right, OK . . ." He swung the shovel, building the fire. Kicked the doors shut, straightened up. "A' love you an' leave you soon" he said. "When we pass the light. If we pass the light . . ."

The signal, if it had been a signal, was not repeated. The heath stretched out empty and black. Ahead was a long series of ridges; the *Lady Anne* bellowed heavily, breasting the first of them. Col stared round again uneasily, hung out the cab to look back along the train. The high shoulders of the tarps were vaguely visible in the night. "What you carryin', Jesse?" he asked. "You got the goods?"

Jesse shrugged. "Bulk stuff. Cattle cake, sugar, dried fruit. Not worth their trouble."

De la Haye nodded worriedly. "Wha's in the trail load?"

"Brandy, some silks. Bit of tobacco. Veterinary supply. Animal castrators." He glanced sideways. "Cord grip. Bloodless."

Col looked startled again, then started to laugh. "Jesse, you are a lad. A right bloody lad . . . But tha's a good load, ol' pal. Nice pickings . . ."

Jesse nodded, feeling empty. "Ten thousand quid's worth. Give or take a few hundred."

De la Haye whistled. "Yeah. Tha's a good load . . ."

They passed the point where the light had appeared, left it behind. Nearly two hours out now, not much longer to run. The *Anne* came off the downslope, hit the second rise. The moon slid clear of a cloud, showed the long ribbon of road stretching ahead. They were almost off the heath now, Durnovaria just over the horizon. Jesse saw a track running away to the left before the moon, veiling itself, gave the road back to darkness.

De la Haye gripped his shoulder. "You be fine now" he said. "We passed the bastards . . . You be all right. I drop off now, ol' pal; thanks for th' ride. An' remember, 'bout the li'l girl. You get in there punchin', you do what a' say. OK, ol' Jesse?"

Jesse turned to stare at him. "Look after yourself, Col" he said quietly.

The other swung onto the step. "A' be OK. A' be great." He let go, vanished in the night.

He'd misjudged the speed of the Burrell. He rolled forward, somersaulted on rough grass, sat up grinning. The lights on the steamer's trail load were already fading down the road. There were noises round him; six mounted men showed dark against the sky. They were leading a seventh horse, its saddle empty. Col saw the quick gleam of a gun barrel, the bulky shape of a crossbow. *Routiers* . . . He got up still laughing, swung onto the spare mount. Ahead the train was losing itself in the low fogbanks. De la Haye raised his arm. "The last waggon . . ." He rammed his heels into the flanks of his horse, and set off at a flat gallop.

Jesse watched his gauges. Full head, a hundred and fifty pounds in the boiler. His mouth was still grim. It wouldn't be enough; down this next slope, halfway up the long rise beyond, that was where they would take him. He moved the regulator to its furthest position; the *Lady Anne* started to build speed again, swaying as her wheels found the ruts. She hit the bottom of the slope at twenty-five slowed as her engine felt the dead pull of the train.

Something struck the nearside hornplate with a ringing

crash. An arrow roared overhead, lighting the sky as it went. Jesse smiled, because nothing mattered any more. The *Anne* seethed and bellowed ; he could see the horsemen now, galloping to either side. A pale gleam that could have been the edge of a sheepskin coat. Another concussion, and he tensed himself for the iron shock of a crossbow bolt in his back. It never came. But that was typical of Col de la Haye ; he'd steal your woman but not your dignity, he'd take your trail load but not your life. Arrows flew again, but not at the loco. Instead they hit her trail load, stuck quivering and burning. Jesse, craning back past the shoulders of the waggons, saw flames running across the sides of the last tarp.

Halfway up the rise ; the *Lady Anne* labouring, panting with rage. The fire took hold fast, tongues of flame licking forward. Soon they would catch the next trailer in line. Jesse reached down. His hand closed slowly, regretfully, round the emergency release. He eased upward, felt the catch disengage, heard the engine beat slacken as the load came clear. The burning truck slowed, faltered and began to roll back away from the train. The horsemen galloped after it as it gathered speed down the slope, clustered round it in a knot whooping and beating upward with their cloaks at the fire. Col passed them at the run, swung from the saddle and leaped. A scramble, a shout ; and the *routiers* bellowed their laughter. Poised on top of the moving load, gesticulating with his one free hand, their leader was pissing valiantly onto the flames . . .

The *Lady Anne* had topped the rise when the cloud scud overhead lit with a white glare. The explosion cracked like a monstrous whip ; the shockwave slapped at the trailers, skewed the steamer off course. Jesse fought her straight, hearing echoes growl back from distant hills. He leaned out from the footplate, stared down past the shoulders of the load. Behind him twinkled spots of fire where the hellburner, two score kegs of finegrain powder packed round with bricks and scrapiron, had scythed the valley clear of life.

Water was low. He worked the injectors, checked the gauge. "We must live how we can" he said, not hearing the words. "We must all live how we can." The firm of

Strange had not been built on softness; what you stole from it, you were welcome to keep . . .

Somewhere a semaphore clanked to Emergency Attention, torches lighting its arms. The *Lady Anne*, with her train behind her, fled for Durnovaria, huddled ahead in the dim silver elbow of the Frome.

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*I would like to thank my good friends Bob and Cath Curtis of Kettering, Northamptonshire, for their tireless help with the technical details of the *Lady Anne*; though final responsibility for the accuracy of the story is of course mine.*

— KEITH ROBERTS

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EDITORIAL—*continued from page 3.*

IMPULSE 3 will contain our first John Rankine story—SEVENTH MOON; a sound and racy solid-fuel job of the best kind. Alistair Bevan returns with a savage and mordant satire on motoring in the future when the traffic-warden mentality really has society by the throat. A third “Pavane” story by Keith Roberts and a startling new Mackelworth complete the main course, though I daresay there will be room for some “typical Bonfiglioli space-filling”. . .

— KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

# A LIGHT FEINT

by John Rackham

You remember that trick Sherlock Holmes played a time or two on Dr. Watson, watching the poor man while he was thinking his own thoughts, and then breaking in on the thought-train as if he had been doing a bit of telepathy? Conan Doyle's account makes it sound an achievement, but if you had Fred to work on, you'd never get a reputation. I had been watching him for some ten minutes. He has a habit of tucking one foot under him when he sits, but despite that he was hopping about in the old chair, fending and parrying, lunging and all the rest of it, working hard. So that when he settled back with a frown and a shake of the head, I broke in just as confidently as the wizard of Baker Street might have done.

"Lost that bout then, Fred?"

He jumped an inch or two, of course, and stared at me with the expected bewilderment.

"Come off it," I said. "The way you've been charging about in the chair, I expected to see you lunge right out and on to the carpet any time!"

At which he grinned, finger-combed his ginger thatch and settled back. But the frown returned. Something puzzled him. Like a fool I had to ask what, although that's not so foolish if you know the circumstances. Fred is involved with a fencing club. Among other things, many other things. And he is usually highly efficient at anything he takes on. He is slightly below average in height and weight, but more than makes up for it in energy and enthusiasm. That, plus a fertile mind that is apt to take off in all sorts of unorthodox directions, makes him an object of wonder and dismay, and a trial to live with. But I asked, anyway. And he told me. All about electric foils and the problems thereof.

"We'd like to have a set," he explained. "But they're expensive, and we aren't all that well-off for funds right now. So I've been figuring out how to make a set myself. It

ought to work out cheaper. Only it's a bit more complicated than I thought. In fact, I reckon it's far too complicated altogether!"

The more he tried to explain, the more I agreed with him. So far as I was able to make out, you score a hit by touching any part of the enemy's target area with your foil point, and because the action is fast and furious and both participants are dressed in protective clothing, you do not have the traditional evidence of blood as proof in a dispute with the referee, or whatever they call the person who stands by and makes judgements. So the electric foil kit was devised to be faster and less fallible than the human eye.

"The foil is wired to the jacket," he explained, "and the jacket has a wire trailing back to a spring-loaded spool, and then to a gadget-box. The other chap is the same. And when my foil touches anywhere on his target-area, a lamp lights up on the box to indicate a 'hit' for me. And vice-versa. Now I've been trying to figure out a way to do the same thing, but not so complicated as that."

I let him roam on a bit. The switchery isn't all that complex, not to do that kind of thing. The trailing wire could be a nuisance, I saw that, but since each combatant has to stay on his own side of the line, or inside a specified area called a 'piste' (I remember that bit), it couldn't be too bothersome. But I soon gathered that Fred, as is usual with him, had gone away beyond the immediate objective, that of making an electric set himself to save expense. He was chasing some notion of making the combatants totally independent of wires altogether. As he put it,

"In these days of solid-state electronics, and micro-miniaturisation, it ought to be possible to fix it somehow that a peanut lamp lights up on my head if the other chap scores a hit—and without wires!"

This was a Friday evening. I had nothing special to do, and the square-eyed entertainment-box wasn't offering anything I desperately wanted to watch, so I was in the right mood to grasp at this teaser. In no time at all we both had completely forgotten the original objectives, of being less complicated, and cheaper. After a bit of preliminary fencing—pardon me—we narrowed it down to a couple of postulates. We wanted a fencing-jacket that would be sensi-

tive, would register, and would be self-contained. But it must register only to a touch from a foil-tip, or button—nothing else.

Well, I won't frighten you with some of the notions that came up. A brain-storm session with Fred is a rare and terrifying experience, the more so when you know, as I do, that he might just grab one of those insane conjectures and make it work. I do know. I've seen it happen. So I have only myself to blame for what did come up. It was a direct follow-on to an idea he had offered, that of making the jacket double-layered with a potential-drop across the inner and outer layer. A prod from a foil-button would make a contact, would bring the two layers in touch. But there was the problem of separation—and the voltage involved—and the difficulties to the fencer from wearing such a delicately adjusted garment—and that idea was allowed to fade, gently.

"But," I said, "there's another way of doing almost the same thing. A transparent plastic material I came across, the other day." We get some odd customers and even odder problems, along at the computer centre, and this had been one of them. "It's a semi-conductor with special properties. It will carry a fairly heavy standing charge on either surface, but the stuff becomes a conductor and passes the charge across when it is exposed to light of a given intensity. Chap who brought it in was hoping to use it in a new photostat printing system."

"Sounds all right, so far."

"Yes. Now all you want is some way of equating the foil-button with a sharp-focus light-source. For instance" and, I insist, I said this purely in jest, ". . . what you need to do now is to hollow out the tip of the foil and put in there a pin-head lamp and lenses such that the lamp-light comes to a focus right on the end of the foil, and you're made!"

It silenced him for about thirty seconds. I expected him to laugh, but he didn't. There came a far-away look to his eyes. "I shall have to hollow out the pommel," he murmured, "and put a battery-holder in there, but I was intending to do that in any case."

"You're never serious? Fred—lenses as small as that?"

"I think I know where I can get the very thing. Chap I know—was telling me about a set of special lenses he had to make up for some medical project that never materialised. I remember him saying they were no bigger than the lead in a pencil. Optically true, half-silvered and everything. I reckon I can get them off him fairly cheap."

He was off, and I didn't try to follow any further, because this was now in his line, not mine. The very thought of drilling out the tip of a foil and inserting gadgetry in it made me feel weak. Not my field. But let me clear up one seeming discrepancy. About cost. Fred had been talking about the available funds of the fencing group, and they were slight. We may be a great sporting nation, but we do not subsidise fencing nearly as generously as its aficionados would like. So he had started with the idea of providing the electric-foil system at a cut rate, within *their* budget. But this, now, had become a personal quest, a challenge. And we, between us, are not exactly poor. Anyway, I left it to him.

Three weeks later, plus a day, a Saturday evening, we were again sitting either side of our fireplace, me wondering whether it was worth the trouble of lighting a fire, and grousing about the worst summer I could ever remember. But Fred was curled up in his chair again, putting the last loving polishes on a foil he was holding. He looked at the clock. Seven.

"In about half-an hour," he said, "they'll be starting the bouts. And on the last two they are going to try out my new gadget."

"I'm surprised you didn't go along to watch!"

In fact, I wasn't. Fred has a surprising streak of modesty along with his madness. I had gathered already that he was smart with foil, épée and sabre, but not up there with the best. And this was the night when the team stars would be performing against some other team. So he was content to stay in the background.

"Anyway," he said, "I wanted to finish off this one, for myself. For my collection." With which he fished a battery out of his pocket, slid it into the handle, and screwed the silver-plated pommel into place. "Feels all right." He hefted it a time or two then rose from his chair and made

a practice lunge or two, a feint, a passata sotto and then another lunge at an imaginary enemy—in fact, the table-leg. Then he came back a couple of steps, whirled, and made a slashing attack on the wall, almost grazing it. But I was still looking at the table-leg, at the thin twist of smoke that came from it. And there was a smell of scorched paint and wood.

"Hang on a bit!" I said, going to the leg and kneeling to check. I had to touch it to be sure, because I didn't trust my eyes. But they were accurate. There was a fine hole, charred and black-edged, right through the stout wood.

"What have you done?" I demanded, and he swung back, still gesturing with that damned sword.

"Never touched it," he said, and flicked the blade-tip across within a fraction of an inch of the leg. Then he got the message too, because the table-leg buckled just a little bit. And then the bottom part, below where he had flicked, leaned over and fell on to the carpet. And there was a thin black scorch-mark all down the wall-paper where he had made that other slash.

"Hold still!" I ordered. "And point that damned thing away from me, if you don't mind. Now—" and we gathered breath, both of us, and set away to find out just what was happening. The very first thing to do was to get the battery out again and make the thing harmless. Then Fred tried to explain just what he had managed to cram into the end of the foil. As you have probably guessed already—and I just do not see how I missed it myself—those "special lenses" were, in fact, rubies. Laser-mirrors for surgical work. I will gamble that the chap who sold them to him had no more idea than he did what they were. But I couldn't see where the power was coming from. All I knew, or needed to know, was that Fred works by ear, by guess, and by some strange magic of his own. He had tried coils and condensers, capacitors and heaven only knows what else, in order to get the pin-point beam sufficiently intense, and accurately placed, to do what he wanted.

And there it was. I had an awful moment imagining what it would have been like had he leaped from his chair

and made a few playful passes at me! While I was still sweating over that, he took the idea a stage further and went a hideous pasty colour.

"Oh my God!" he gasped. "The team! Any minute now they are going to start lashing out with these things!"

"Get on the phone, quick! Tell 'em not to!"

"Can't!"

"Don't tell me you don't know the number! It'll be in the book—"

"It won't. It's a church hall place, over Tulse Hill way, and it's not on the phone!" He dropped the foil, chewed his lip. "I've got to get there somehow, and stop them. Half an hour at the very outside—"

I thought of bus, train and taxi, and discarded them as fast as they came up. Not at seven-fifteen p.m. in our part of town, on a Saturday night.

"It'll have to be the Monster," he snapped, and I had to laugh, even if I didn't feel like it.

"You'll never get more than five feet off the ground in that, and you know it. You never have yet!"

"I can though, if you come as well!"

"Me?" I stopped laughing instantly. "You must be out of your mind! D'you think I'm going to risk my neck on that thing along with you?" But he was already dragging me by the arm to the open space at the back that we like to call a yard. Macbeth would have recognised it as a "blasted heath" straight off. But the Monster would have baffled him. I stared at it, not for the first time, while Fred fairly pleaded with me.

"I've figured out why it's unstable," he said. "It's because there's uneven distribution of weight with only one passenger. You remember Wells's 'Drachenflieger'? The way the driver had to slide to the back end to make the front end rise, and then nip up front to make it go down again?"

Now I have a weakness for Wells. That wing-flapping contraption of his sounded feasible to me the first time I read it, and it still does. So Fred had my ear. But I also have a great deal of affection for my skin. And I am—I like to think—sane. The Monster isn't. It had begun its

improbable life as Fred's attempt to make a hover-motor-bike, but, as already mentioned, that fertile brain seldom rests within the scope of some limited objective like that.

Think of an old-fashioned galvanised bath-tin. Turn it upside-down. Stick a long wooden form on the top, well padded with motor-cycle seating. Now set handlebars at one end, and you have the superficial appearance. You also have no idea what may lurk underneath. I know some of it, but not all. An extremely powerful engine accounts for most of it. Then there are fans, jets, vanes, super-chargers—and other things for which names are inadequate. I had watched Fred, in odd moments, trying to master the thing. As you have already gathered, he is wiry and agile, and has more lives than any ten cats you care to choose at random, otherwise he would not still be here. I had heard the thing roar, had seen it lurch drunkenly into the air and climb to its ceiling—about five feet. Up to that level he was, it seemed, in full command. But beyond that it did just what it liked. One of its prettier tricks was to point its nose to the stars and whirl round on what one must call its tail, before plunging to earth with an ear-bending clatter.

And this was what he expected me to mount, with him, to try to travel some ten miles, across the metropolis! But then I thought of the bloody mayhem that would certainly be done in some run-down little church hall in Tulse Hill if we were not there to stop it. I had ghastly visions of darting cuts and slashes with laser-beams, limbs dropping off and writhing about on the canvas matting, and I drew what I hoped was not the last of my deep breaths.

"All right." I sighed. "I'm right behind you," and we climbed on just as we were. It was a pleasant evening. The sun had given up long ago, but there was still a fair amount of light fighting its way through the clouds. The idea I am trying to convey is that it was a sane scene, everywhere except where we were. One thinks of the most extraordinary things at such times. As Fred did whatever was necessary to start the thing, and made the evening hideous with roaring engine noises, it struck me that I would be no use whatever as a horseman. I can't do the knee-gripping bit at all. It hurts the inside muscles of my thighs. But

there was nothing to hold on to, except Fred. It was a small mercy that my legs were long enough to reach down and rest my feet on the top of the casing of the thing.

I heard the engine-sound change tune, and I knew that this was due to various vanes opening, giving the fans and compressors and such some work to do. A down-breeze began to flutter the legs of my trousers. The hard-work booming grew louder. And Fulham just fell away all around us. It is an absurd thing to say, but that is exactly what it felt like—just as if the local scene had dropped into a pit, leaving us standing. That didn't last long. Once our steed started to pitch and yaw, we knew it was us who were flying, and I for one was swallowing hard to keep my last meal steady. Our own homely building, and the rest of the street, fell uneasily away. We flew—if that is the word—in the occasional direction of a towering block of flats not far from us. Ten stories high!

"Go round it!" Fred screamed, over his shoulder. "Use it for landmark!" I was too confused to try to work out what he meant, and I still don't know. At that moment I was far more interested in the performance of the Monster. In theory, as he had explained to me often, the handlebar steering was meant to operate like an aircraft joystick. Forward and back, or to either side, you did this by tilting the thing in the appropriate direction, and when you turned it left or right you presumed it would turn and head in that direction. I had tried to follow his explanation once, on paper, and it had baffled me completely. Now I saw it in action. We leaned to the left, to the right, we put our nose down, or up. We spun dizzily on our own axis. But we slid steadily for that infernal pile of massive concrete and glass as if drawn by a magnet. So Fred did the only thing possible in the circumstances, and trod on the power. We went up, not straight up, but at a steep angle. It was a matter of inches, I'll swear, between us and that top coping. I put my feet down again and stared.

Two delectable young ladies dressed for sunbathing lay momentarily paralysed on their airbeds, then moved spasmodically to clutch things and screech at us to go away. This by their impassioned gestures, for we couldn't hear a thing over the engine-roar. Nor, for a vertiginous while,

could we go away either. The Monster seemed to have found somewhere it liked, and despite all Fred could do, we hung there, bobbing and spinning, for quite five minutes. He has assured me since that this was all complete accident, that he had forgotten to gear-in one set of controls to do with the vane-complex. Whether true or not, he remembered it now, and all at once we shot away at a fair speed, away from the roof-top exhibition and straight as any arrow for the looming chimney-stacks of the power-station. He has explained this, too, since then.

"The whole idea," he says with impeccable logic, "was to get where we were going as quickly as possible. And if you're flying, you don't have to bother with roads and routes, you go in a straight line, surely?"

Our straight line lay in that direction. Over his shoulder I watched the four huge stacks, black in the sunset, coming closer and closer. Up there great folding masses of grey-black smoke were rolling out and sliding away. At their foot cotton-wool puffs of steam were twisting and swirling, and I remember dwelling on another wild irrelevancy. We were probably breaking six or seven laws, although I couldn't think of one, offhand. But it didn't seem to matter. We were immune. What policeman could follow us, here? Or even identify us, from down there? And then I noticed something else. We were hitting a good speed, and not rolling about too much, but the chimneys seemed to swing back and forth ahead of us. Fred screamed back at me.

"Steering's still a bit dodgy. Wind's putting me off!" This was the first time I'd noticed the wind, but now my attention was drawn to it, it was fresh. And cold. I shivered, but it wasn't all due to the brisk breeze. In cold fact there is a fairish space between those massive chimneys, but the way we were weaving about that space didn't look nearly big enough to let us through. For once, Fred shared my doubts. He did the only possible thing. He stood on the throttle once more, and we went up. And up. One of the few rules about the Monster's flying pattern is that the higher you go the less stable it is. And those chimneys are high. We were teetering like a drunken man on a traffic-island by the time we rose level with the stack-tops.

Enormous black holes, they were. And that smoke doesn't just roll out lazily. It gushes at a considerable speed, as we learned when we slid smack into it. Nobody need ever try to tell me about the "mouth of hell" any more. I've been. There's something particularly dreadful about having the heat come at you from underneath. It seems to catch your breath more, and finds ways of getting under your clothing. It was hot enough to hurt instantly, to bring squirting sweat. And black enough to blind. And thick with scratchy grit that got immediately into my eyes, nose and mouth. And the fumes catch your breath, scrape your throat so that you want to cough and can't because you're still trying to breathe in, to get enough breath to cough with. It seemed ages, could only have been a few seconds, and then we were through and out the other side into fresh air.

I was weeping-blind, raw-throated, and hot. And then, very rapidly, I was still blind, still coughing agonisedly, but cold. Shivering. I got my eyes open long enough to see that we had taken a tremendous leap up and away—a thermal effect, I imagine—and it was at about that point that my reactions went on strike. To anything, be it joy or terror, there comes a limit beyond which a kind of stupefied indifference takes over. I clung, feeling gritty particles between my teeth, and watched Fred hunch and struggle with the controls, and eventually take us down in a steep screaming dive, and it didn't seem to matter at all. Part of my mind went away somewhere and pondered its own thoughts.

Where, it wondered, had all that power come from? Not with the Monster, but with those lasers? I appreciate the sometimes fantastic things one can do with modern electronics, but to get that kind of lethal power from a single cell, a penlight battery, one-and-a-half volts! I yelled the enigma at him as we levelled off and began roaring through the air towards our objective. He turned a sooty black face to me over his shoulder, and I caught part of it, something about a trigger grip on the foil, the handle, because one instinctively grips when one is making a lunge, and this would close the switch and turn on the light. And something about capacitors and charging up, then releasing the

stored power in short bursts. Apparently this was the only way he had found to make "lenses" focus tight enough and give a sufficiently intense spot of light for the conduction effect in the plastic of the jacket. I caught the figure "Four hundred times . . ." and assumed it meant he had achieved a four hundred factor of amplification. A six hundred volt spotlight, then.

I pondered that as we climbed drunkenly up the terraced side of yet another block of flats. I caught a glimpse of an unfortunate woman who was making beds, and saw us gliding up past her window. I couldn't feel too badly about her. At least she had something soft to faint on. I hadn't. But that was still too faint. Six hundred volts, I mean. It might make a blister if you held your hand to it, but it wouldn't punch a hole in an oak table-leg, or slice it off. Fred must have slipped in his figures, or done something more than usually outlandish.

We cleared the flats and saw a huge spidery radio mast of some kind. I was already shivering, so couldn't react any more, but as it happened we didn't get that far, because he spotted the place he was looking for and we went down in a drunken swoop. I'd had visions of coming down in a street somewhere, straight into the aghast arms of the law, but Fred had figured this bit out well ahead of time. The church hall building had a flat roof. We landed on it. Just leave it at that. I have no way of describing the actual performance, the dipping and fluttering and the final bone-breaking crash. We got down, and off. My legs held me up. He made a mad rush for a doorway in a small box-like affair in one corner, and within seconds we were haring down a narrow reversing stairway. After the third right-wheel we left wood and were on stone steps. The moment of truth was at hand and we had no story ready. At least, I hadn't.

It didn't seem to worry Fred, who was leaping the stairs two at a time. We came to a flat landing and a passage, then a swing round and down, and several doors. He drove at one, threw it open and barged straight in. I was close enough after him to see a tall blonde girl in nothing more than a skirt spin round, and screech, and grab something to cover herself. Another, by the wall, just stood and gaped. I

saw fencing jackets, masks and foils, and heard the blonde gulp quite audibly, then say,

"Fred? It *is* Fred, isn't it? What are you doing all made up . . .?" And then an angry voice behind us wanted to know.

"Here, what's all this then?" and a young Hercules shoved past me to start to grab. Then he stopped as he saw the condition of the shoulder he was reaching for. By that time Fred had turned, and I saw just how hideous he looked. By reasoning, I must have looked the same. I cringed.

"Fred? What's the idea of the black-face, then?"

"Skip it!" Fred croaked. "Have you used the special foils yet?"

"Eh? Oh them! Yes, we used them for the first two bouts. They worked fine. Everybody was very impressed. We won both the bouts too. Barrage third and we won the fourth. We're having a break right now . . ."

"You've used the special foils?" It was a throaty howl of disbelief from both of us. Two other men had come in, and the two girls were over their first fright and frankly puzzled.

"What's up?" the blonde girl who had screamed now eyed us and I could see giggles not far away. "I won the first bout. Shouldn't I have done?"

"Can I see your foil—and jacket, please?" I asked, and she got the weapon from the table, still clutching a blouse to her front.

"This is mine. That's my jacket. What's up?"

I took the foil, felt for the pressure-switch, turned the button to point it close to the table-top, and pressed. Nothing happened. Fred took it out of my hand impatiently and did the same. Then he stretched his hand and brought the button-tip close to his palm. Nothing! He did it again, but peering closely this time.

"The light goes on," he grunted, "but I don't feel a thing!"

"What d'you mean, feel?" the blonde girl giggled. "You're not meant to, are you?"

"You never know with Fred," one of the young men chuckled, and I had fellow-feeling for him. But the enigma remained.

"Try to remember just what you did," I implored. "You said four hundred times. If you start with a volt and a half, that's only six hundred volts. Wouldn't hurt a thing. There's got to be something else."

"But there isn't!" he insisted. "You saw what I did." He unscrewed the pommel, tilted the battery out—and something clicked in my mind.

"Whoa!" I muttered. "That battery—it doesn't look quite the same as the one you had. Different colour."

"So?" he shrugged. "Different make, I expect." He slapped his trousers, making the soot fly, and groped in his right hand pocket, while the pop-eyed crowd backed away warily from the dust-cloud. "Here you are, this is the one I used." Before I could stop him he had slipped it in place, replaced the pommel with a quick twist, and flicked the foil, just casually, at the table leg. And he did it again! The leg separated neatly, one half fell away, and the whole table leaned. Clothing, masks, foils, handbags, mirror and all manner of other things just skidded and fell to the floor in a tremendous clatter. The girl by the wall made her first and last sound, a sigh, and keeled over. The blonde girl's eyes opened until I thought they would fall right out.

"The battery," I said, unsteadily. "Let's have that battery!" That was it, of course. A twenty-seven volt photo-flash battery. You can do the sum yourself. He had only been waving about a laser-beam of some ten thousand volts! The fencing team don't use the trick foils any more. I don't think Fred is even a member of the club now. I don't know how he got the Monster home. I walked. Thankful to be able to, frankly. Know anyone who can use some rather special lenses, no thicker than a pencil-lead, half-silvered?

— JOHN RACKHAM

*I will break the door of hell and smash the bolts; I will bring up the dead to eat food with the living, and the living shall be outnumbered by the host of them.*

— THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

# BREAK THE DOOR OF HELL

by John Brunner

*In those days, the forces were none of them chained. They raged unchecked through every corner and quarter of the cosmos. Here ruled Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, capricious, whimsical, and when he stared things melted in frightful agony. There a bright being shed radiance, but the radiance was all-consuming, and that which was solid and dull was flashed into fire. At another place, creatures in number one million fought desperately with one another for the possession of a single grain of dust; the fury of their contesting laid waste whole solar systems.*

— IMPRINT OF CHAOS

Time had come to Ryovora.

The traveller in black—who had many names, but one nature—contemplated the fact from the brow of the hill where he had imprisoned Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, more eons ago than he cared to count. Leaning on his staff made of light, curdled with a number of interesting forces, he repressed a shiver. Single though his nature might be, unique though that certainly was, he was not immune to apprehension; his endowments did not include omniscience.

Time had come to that great city: Time, in which could exist order and logic and rational thought. And so it was removed from his domain for ever, gone from the borderland of chaos which exists timeless in eternity.

The task for which his single nature fitted him was the bringing forth of order out of that chaos; accordingly, he should have felt the satisfaction of achievement, or even a mildly vain pleasure. He did not, and for this there were two most cogent reasons and a third which he preferred not to consider.

The first, and most piquing, was that a duty lay on him: that at a certain season following the conjunction of four significant planets hereabout, he must oversee that portion of the All which was his charge. And he had grown accustomed to terminating his round of inspection at Ryovora, known far and wide as the place where people had their heads screwed on right. There if anywhere he could look on his work and be pleased.

Lapses and backsliding had occasionally minded him to alter this habit; still, he had never done so, and to discover that Ryovora was—elsewhere—annoyed him.

The second reason was not annoying. It was alarming, and absolutely unprecedented, and dismayed, and many other distressing epithets.

"In sum," the traveller in black announced to the air, "it's unheard of!"

Another city had arisen in the borderland of chaos, and it was stamped all over with the betraying mark of Time.

How was it possible? Carried in some eddy whose flow ran counter to the universal trend, so that from reason and logic it receded to the random laws of chance? Presumably. Yet the means whereby such an eddy might be created seemed inconceivable; some great enchantment would be required, and in the grip of Time enchantment was impossible.

"Fantastic!" said the traveller in black, speaking aloud again to distract his mind from the third and least palatable reason for regretting the loss of Ryovora. It was known to him that when he had accomplished his task all things would have but one nature; then they would be subsumed into the Original All, and time would have a stop. Beyond which point . . .

He glanced around him at the hillside. It was sparsely overgrown with grey-leaved bushes, and dust-devils rose among the rocks to sift their substance, fine as ashes, over

the footprints he had left on the path. That was the doing of Laprivan, to whom memories of yesterday were hurtful, and who accordingly used what small power remained to him to wipe away the traces of the past.

The staff tapped, once, twice, and again. At the third tap the elemental heaved in his underground prison and cracks appeared in the road. From these a voice boomed, monstrous, making the welkin echo.

"Leave me be!"

"What do you know of the city which stands yonder?" said the traveller in black.

"Nothing," said Laprivan sullenly.

"Nothing? You say so to spare yourself the pain of memory, Laprivan! Shall I send you where Ryovora has gone, into the domain of Time?"

The whole hill shuddered, and an avalanche of grey rock rattled on its further side. The sourceless voice moaned, "What should I know of the city yonder? No man has come from it and passed this way."

"Bad," said the traveller thoughtfully. "Very bad."

After that he was silent for a long while, until at last the elemental pleaded, "Leave me be! Leave me to wipe clean the slate of the past!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller absently, and tapped with his staff again. The cracks in the ground closed; the dust-devils resumed their whirling.

Ignoring all this, the traveller gazed over the green and orderly meadows in the valley. The city lay in noon-tide sunlight like a worn-out toy cast aside by a giant's child. The heedless ruin of Time was everywhere about it, tooth-marks of the greatest leveller on brick and stone and metal. It had been fair and rich, that was plain; its gates were of oak and bronze—but the bronze was corroded green; its towers were of silver and orichalcum—but their bright sheen was overlaid with a dull mist like the foul breath of a swamp; its streets were broad and paved with marble—but the flags lifted to the roots of wild plants, and here and there one found holes filled by the rain and noxious with algae and insect-larvae.

Out of Time and into chaos. Almost beyond belief.

At length he stirred himself. There was nothing else for

it—so he reasoned—but to set off on his journey of obligation, and come at last not to familiar, welcome Ryovora, but to this enigma wished on him by fate and boding no good whatever.

Relief carried him far and fast. To learn that Acromel stood where it had, the place where honey itself was bitter; to know that they yet fished Lake Taxhling when the stars came out, and that the river Metamorphia fed it with strange unspawned creatures, greedy and unwholesome—this was reassuring, an earnest of balance continued in the cosmos.

And at these places and many many more he did what on this journey was required of him.

A lonely hut stood on the shelf-edge of a mountain pasture in the land called Eyneran; here where he paused to ask a crust of bread and a sup of ewe's milk from the flock high and distant as clouds on the steep meadow, a woman with a frightened face opened the ill-carpentered door to him, and met his request with a silent shake of the head.

She was wrinkled and worn out beyond her years; yet the hut was sound, a savoury smell filled the air, and the clean floor and many copper pots the traveller could see assorted badly with the woman's ragged gown and bare feet. He waited. Shortly a cry—man-decp, yet edged with a child's petulance—rang out.

"Mother, come here! The pot's boiling over! What's keeping you, you lazy slut?"

"Mintra!" whispered the woman, and a patter of feet announced the passage of a girl, some twelve years old, across the floor to tend the pot.

Another cry, still louder: "Mother, come and give me some of it! Mintra can't lift the pot, you stupid old bag of bones!"

"We can't give you food," the woman said to the traveller. "It's for my son."

The traveller nodded, but waited still. Then at last with great heaving and panting came the son into view: gross-bulging in his apparel of velvet worked with gilt wire and stained with slobberings of food, so tall he nearly scraped the roof with his pate, yet so fat he breathed hard for the

simple effort of standing upright. His fist, big as a ham, cracked his mother behind the ear.

"Why don't you die, you lazy old cow, and get it over with?" he bellowed.

"It'd be a merciful relief," the woman whimpered. "And die I would of my own free will, but that I stand alone between you and your sister! With me gone you'd take her like a harlot, sister or no!"

"And wouldn't she be a tasty bit for my bed?" chorused the son with an evil grin, his tongue coming out thick as an ox's to stroke his lips lasciviously.

"As you wish," said the traveller, "so be it." And he knocked his staff on the threshold and took his leave.

That night the plague stole silent from the mountain mist, and took the mother as the son had wished; then the girl Mintra fled on light feet down the hill-trails and the fever-giddy glutton went calling her among the heedless sheep till his gross weight dislodged a rock and sent him like an animal to feed the crows.

In the rich city Gryte a thief spoke to curse the briefness of the summer night, which had cut short his plan to break the wall of a merchant's counting-house.

"Oh that dawn never came!" he cried. "Oh that I had lasting darkness whereby to ply my trade!"

"As you wish," said the traveller, "so be it." And darkness came: two thick grey cataracts that shut the light away.

Likewise in Medham was another rogue, striving to seduce a lady who feared her charms were passing with the years so that he might win to a coffer of gold secreted in her chamber. "I love you!" declared the smooth-tongued deceiver. "I'd love you had you no more than rags and a shack!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and the bailiffs came down the street to advise the lady that her house and treasure were forfeit on another's debt, so that the liar turned and ran, not staying to hear the city officers who followed hard on the bailiffs' heels to report the honouring of the debt a day past due.

So too in Wocrahin a swaggering bully came down the

street on market day, cuffing aside children with the back of his hand and housewives with the flat of his sword. "Oh that my way were not cluttered with such riffraff!" he exclaimed, his shoulder butting into the traveller's chest.

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and when the bully turned the corner the street he walked was empty under a leaden sky—and the buildings either side, and the taverns, and the shops. Nor did he again in all eternity have to push aside the riffraff he had cursed; he was alone.

This, however, was not the sum total of the traveller's doings as he passed from place to place within his realm. In Kanish-Kulya they had built a wall to keep Kanishmen and Kulyamen apart, and from either side, set into the masonry, grinned down the skulls of those dead in a war for which the reason had long been forgotten. In this strange and dreadful place Fegrim was pent under a volcano; shadowed by its cone the traveller halted and spoke long and seriously with that elemental, and when he was done the country for a mile on every side was dusted with cinders, little and bright as fireflies.

At Gander's Well, branched Yorbeth brooded in the guise of a tall tree whose main root tapped a wonderful subterranean spring and whose branches, fed with miraculous sap, sprouted leaves and fruit of which the like had not been seen under any sun before. The traveller spent an hour in the shade of that tree, and for the questions he asked was constrained to carry away a red twig and later catch a cat and perform a ceremony with these two objects—a price he paid with heavy heart, for he had been told nothing of any great use in his inquiries.

Also he consulted with Farchgrind, and in Leppersley he cast the bones of a girl's foot to read the runes they formed, and after great labour he incarcerated Wolpec in a candle over whose flame he smoked a piece of glass which thereupon showed three truths: one ineluctable, one debatable and one incomprehensible. That was in Teq, when the end of his journey was near.

So finally he came to Barbizond, where there was always a rainbow in the sky because of the bright being Sardhin,

chained inside a thundercloud with fetters of lightning. Three courses remained to him: he might free Sardhin and let him speak, and from here to the horizon nothing would be left save himself, the elemental and that which was of its nature bright, as jewels, or fire, or the shining edge of a keen-bladed knife; or he might do as once he had done in similar circumstances—address himself to an enchanter and make use of powers that trespassed too far towards naked chaos to be within his own scope—or finally he might go forward in ignorance to the strange city and confront the challenge of fate without the armour of foreknowledge.

Some little while remained to him before he needed to take his final decision. Coming to Barbizond, therefore, he made his way down a fine broad avenue where plane and lime trees alternated in the direction of a steel-blue temple. There stood the altar of Hnua-Threl, who was also Sardhin when he chose to be; the people invoked him with daily single combats on the temple floor. They were not a gentle folk, these inhabitants of Barbizond, but they were stately, and they died—in tournaments, or by the assassin's knife, or by their own hand—with dignity.

Such a death had lately occurred, that was plain, for approaching the city gate came a funeral procession: on a high-wheeled cart drawn by apes in brazen harness, the corpse wrapped in sheets of lead, gold and woven leaves; a band of gongmen beating a slow measure to accompany musicians whistling like birds on pipes no larger than a finger; eight female slaves naked to the ceaseless warm rain; and last a straggle of mourners, conducting themselves with appropriate solemnity.

He who passed penultimately of the mourners was a fat and jolly person on each of whose shoulders perched a boy-child sheltered by the enormous brim of his leather hat. The traveller stared long at him before stepping out from the protection of the nearest tree and addressing him courteously.

"Your pardon, sir, but are you not Eadwil?"

"I am," the fat one answered, not loth to halt and let the funeral wend its way to the graveyard without his assistance. "Should I know you, sir?"

"Perhaps not," said the traveller in black. "Though I know you. I'd not have expected to see you here; you were formerly one of the chief merchant enchanters of Ryovora."

"A long time ago, sir," Eadwil answered with a deprecat-  
ing smile. The two children on his shoulders giggled and  
one of them tried to reach for the traveller's staff, almost  
lost his balance, and righted himself with the aid of a pat  
from Eadwil's broad soft hand.

"May I ask what brought about your change of resi-  
dence?" the traveller murmured.

"My change of employment," Eadwil shrugged, again  
nearly dislodging the more venturesome boy. "You spoke  
of me as a merchant enchanter—but when the decision was  
taken, many years ago, to let rational thought rule Ry-  
ovora and put an end to conjurations there, certain conse-  
quences followed. For myself I have no regrets; there  
was a geas upon me which made my feet glow red-hot  
when I walked, and now nothing worse attends a long  
tramp like today's except an occasional blister. And these  
my grandsons, too—heh, you little nuisances?—they'd not  
be here today if I'd submitted to the other main restriction  
which purchased by powers." He rubbed the boys' backs  
affectionately, and they responded by pulling his ears.

This was quite true, as the traveller knew well; Eadwil  
had postponed the growing of his first beard till unusually  
late in life by making the trade on which his command  
of magic had been based.

"So there came an end to my conjuring of fine silks  
and spices, of rare wines and exotic perfumes!" Eadwil  
pursed his lips. "And there were, one must confess, certain  
persons in Ryovora who felt the lack of those luxuries  
and accused us ex-enchanters of—ha-hm!—betraying  
them. Barbizond is a fair city in its way, though the local  
customs are not to my taste; still, no one plagues me for  
magical doings and I've lived to be a grandfather to my  
own surprise . . . You have late news of Ryovora, sir?  
For it comes to my mind that I've heard nothing from my  
old home in quite a while."

The traveller shook his head and gave a wry smile. "It's  
a fair span since I last set foot there. Indeed, I was hop-

ing you might be able to give me certain information which I lack, rather than *vice versa*."

Eadwil looked politely downcast at being of no help; then one of the boys grew impatient and started to fidget.

"Home?" said his grandfather, and laughed indulgently. "Very well—old Harpentile is in no state to notice that we failed to attend his burying. Good day to you, sir," he added to the traveller. "It's been pleasant to renew our acquaintance, and I greatly hope you find someone who can aid you in these inquiries where I failed you."

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller under his breath, and a great weight seemed to recede from his heart.

That accomplished, there was no more to do than to wait till the course of fate worked itself out. The traveller took a seat at a kerbside tavern; with his elbows on a green table-top he watched the passers-by and wondered in what guise his helper would come. The avenue grew crowded as the day wasted. Men in gay jerkins with armour clanking at their saddle-bows came by, challengers in some tourney for the hand of an heiress; pedlars and wonder-workers with a few small tricks, for which they had paid excessively to judge by their reddened eyes, pocked cheeks, limping gait or even womanly shrill voices—no wonder, the traveller reflected, Eadwil felt he had had the better bargain.

Women, too, passed: high-wimpled dames attended by maids and dandling curious unnamable pets, harlots in diaphanous cloaks through which it was not quite possible to tell if they were diseased, good wives with panniers of stinking salted fish and honest bread and sealed jars of pollywogs for use in the commonplace home enchantments of this city.

And children also: some naked not necessarily from poverty but because skin was the best waterproof under Barbizon's light continual shower, others in fantastical costumes to match the whim of one or other parent—helmets of huge egg-shells, bodices of leaves glued like scales, coats like tents and breeches like plant-stems with the knees made to resemble knots in springtime. With spinning paper windmills, toy lances, tops, hoops and skip-

ping-ropes they darted among the adults and left a trail of joyful disorder.

There was no joy in the heart of the traveller in black—only a dulled apprehension.

The places at the tables before the tavern filled with customers, till only one was left—the second chair at this table where the traveller waited. Then, to the instant, appeared a curious bewildered figure from the direction of the city gate: a pale-faced, wild-haired man in a russet cape, clinging to a pitiful bag of belongings as though to a baulk of timber in an ocean of insanity. Time had etched his brow with suffering, and the traveller knew him the moment he clapped eyes on him.

Abreast of the tavern the stranger stopped. Envously his eyes scanned the delicacies placed before the customers: fragrant jars of wine, mounds of mashed fruit stuck with silver spoons, crisp sheets of moonbark that only this city's enchanters knew how to bring across the freezing gulf of space without spoiling. Huddling his bag under his arm, he felt in his scrip for money, and produced one solitary copper coin.

Hesitant, he approached the traveller in black. "Sir, by your leave, will this purchase anything at your tavern here?" he muttered, and offered the coin on a trembling palm.

The traveller took it and turned it over, and was at pains to conceal the shock he felt 'on seeing what name the reverse of the coin bore.

Ys!

A city in Time so great and famous that rumours of it had crossed the tenuous border of chaos, running ahead of those who bore its news until the stories were magnified beyond believing, until there were prophecies caused by the recirculation of those rumours through one corner of eternity and back to Time—ahead of reality.

"No?" said the stranger sadly, seeing how long the black-clad one spent staring at his only money.

"Why—!" the latter exclaimed, and rubbed the coin with his fingertips, very lightly. "I should say so, friend! Is it not good gold, that passes anywhere?"

"Gold?" The stranger snatched it back, almost dropping

his shabby bag in his agitation, and scrutinised it incredulously. Through the coppery tarnish gleamed the dull warm yellow of precious metal.

Without more ado he slumped into the vacant chair at this table, and the waggle-hipped serving-girl came to his side. "Food and drink!" he commanded, letting the miraculous coin ring on the table. "I starve and I'm clemmed with thirst—be quick!"

Eyes twinkling, the traveller regarded his new acquaintance. "And how are you called, sir?" he demanded.

"Jacques of Ys is my name," the other sighed. "Though truth to tell I'm not overmuch inclined to add my origin to my name any longer."

"Why so?"

"Would you wish to be shamed with a city full of fools?"

"Considering the matter with due reflection," said the traveller, "I think—no."

"Well, then!" Jacques of Ys ran his long bony fingers through his already untidy hair; the water had been trying to sleek it down, but half an ocean would probably have been unequal to the task. He was a gaunt man, neither old nor young, with burning grey eyes and a bush of tawny beard.

"And in what way are the people of Ys foolish?" probed the traveller.

"Once they were a great people," Jacques grunted. "And that's where the trouble started. Once we had a fleet—and not on any inland lake, either, but an Oceanus itself, mother of storms and gulls. Also we had an army to guard our trade routes, skilful money-changers, wise counsellors . . . Ah, Ys was among the finest cities of the world!"

"I believe I've heard so," the traveller agreed.

"Then your news is stale, sir!" Jacques thumped on the table. "Listen! There came changes—in the times, in the weather, in the currents of the sea. To be expected, I say, for did not Heraclitus teach us *panta rhei*, all things flow? But soft living and much ease had stolen the brains out of the people's heads! Faced with the silting-up of our great harbours, did they go to it and build dredgers? They did not! Faced with a landslide that closed our chief silk-road, did they go scouting to locate another way? They did not!"

Faccd with long winters that killed our autumn wheat in the ground, did they sow barley or the hardy northern oat? They did not!"

"Then—what did they do?" the traveller inquired.

"Fell first to moaning and wringing their hands, and lamenting their sade fate; then, when this proved unfruitful and incapable of filling the granaries, turned to a crowning imbecility and invoked the impossible aid of magic. I see you scowl, sir, and well you may, for all the world knows magic is a vain and ridiculous snare laid by evil demons in the path of mankind."

This was a stubborn and pigheaded fellow, clearly; with his hand closed around a coin that veritable magic—and no petty domestic hearth-spell, either—had turned from copper to gold, he could still make such an assertion. He would not care for this domain in which he now found himself. Still, there was no help for that.

"And to what purpose did their researches in—ah—*magic* tend?" the traveller asked.

"To bring back the great days of the past, if you please," said Jacques with majestic scorn, and on the last word crammed his mouth full from the dish the serving-girl placed before him.

While he assuaged his hunger, the traveller contemplated this news. Yes, such an event as Jacques had described would account for the paradox of Ys reversing the cosmic trend and exchanging Time for eternity and its attendant confusions. But there must have been a great and terrible hope in the minds of very many people for the change to be brought about; there must have been public foolishness on a scale unparalleled in the All. Thinking on this, the traveller felt his face grow grim.

He got to his feet, grasping his staff, and Jacques glanced up with his cheeks bulging. Having swallowed frantically, he spoke. "Sire, did I intrude on your meditations? Your pardon if—"

"No, Jacques. You merely recalled me to some unfinished business. You are right in your description of the people of Ys. They are fools indeed. So do not—if you will take my advice—go back there."

"Where else shall I go then?" Jacques countered, and

for a second despair looked out from behind his eyes. "I set off thinking no place could be worse than my home had become—yet on this brief journey I've seen wonders and marvels that make me question my own good sense. I met a creature on the road that was neither man nor beast, but a blending; I saw a shining sprite washing feet like alabaster in a cloud rimmed with rainbows, and once when I bent to drink from a stream I saw pictures in the water which—no, I dare not say what I thought I saw."

"That would be the brook called Geirion," said the traveller, and gave a crooked smile. "Don't worry—things seen there can never become real. The folk round about go to the brook to rid themselves of baseless fears."

Jacques glanced over his shoulder at the motley crowd and shivered with dismay. "Nonetheless, sir, I'm not minded to remain in this—peculiar city!"

"It would be better for you to adapt to the local customs than to go home," the traveller warned. "A certain rather terrible doom is likely to overtake Ys, if things are as you say."

"Doom!" cried Jacques, and an unholy joy lit his face. "I told them so—over and again I told them! Would I could witness it, for the satisfaction of seeing them learn how right I was!"

The traveller sighed, but there was no help for it now; his single nature bound him to unique courses of action. He said sourly, "As you wish, so be it. Go hence towards the city men call Acromel, where honey itself is bitter, but do not enter it; go rather around it towards the setting sun, and you will reach a grey hill fledged with grey bushes where there are always dust-devils. Look behind you and see how they wipe out your footprints a moment after you have passed. From the brow of that hill you can see Ys. Wait there."

"Now just a moment," said Jacques, rising. "From my boyhood up I've wandered around and about Ys, and I know of no such hill as you describe!"

The traveller shrugged and made to turn away. Jacques caught at him.

"Wait! What's your name, that you say such strange things and send me on such an improbable errand?"

"You may call me Mazda, or anything you like," the black-clad man said, and shook off the claw-like grip with a mow of distaste.

"Hah! That's rich!" Jacques put his hands on his hips and laughed. "But still . . . For the sake of wanting to see how Ys goes to its fate, I'll follow your instructions. And my thanks!"

He parodied a bow, flourishing a hat that was not on his head.

"You may not thank me more than this once," said the traveller in black sadly, and went his way.

Lord Vengis sat in the Hall of State in Ys, and gazed at the nobility assembled in his presence. Once this had been a building to marvel at: mirrors higher than a man lined its walls, set between pilasters of marble, gilt and onyx, and the arching roof was painted with scenes in eleven bright colours, showing the birth of Saint Clotilda, the martyrdom of Saint Gaufroy—that one was mostly in red—and the ascension of Saint Eulogos to heaven on the back of a leaping dolphin; the floor, moreover, had been carpeted with ermine and bear-pelts.

The pelts had gone. Some of them, to be exact, had returned—but in unusual fashion: they had been cut into coat, for the nobles, and now surrounded impressive paunches and bosoms with the aid of gilt girdles. Worse yet, some of the underlying slabs of marble had been prised up to expose crude stone flags—a rumour having got around as to the effectiveness of marble for sacrificial altars—and on an irregularity of this kind, in an ill-lit corner, Lord Vengis had twisted his ankle on the way into the hall.

That was the trouble with all Ys now. The harbours that once swallowed the twice-daily ocean tides were blocked with stinking mud; grass grew on the stone moles as it did in the wheel-ruts of the fine old roads leading away from the city—though none of the personages present had seen this fact with his or her own eyes, all having declined to leave Ys since things took their turn for the worse. In the gardens of the great houses a plant like, but not identical with, mistletoe had spread over the hand-

some trees, letting fall a sticky fruit on those who walked beneath; in the deep sweet-water wells servants claimed to have heard ominous voices, so that now they refused to let the buckets down for fear of drawing up those who spoke; last week's market had reduced to two old men squabbling over a cracked earthen pot and a comb of dirty wild honey.

Lord Vengis glowered at the company, and they fell silent by degrees. Their attendants moved, silent as shadows, to the double doors of entrance, closed them, barred them against all intrusion—for this was no discussion which the common people were permitted to overhear.

With the clanging down of the final bar, one leaped to his feet at the end of the front rank of gilded chairs, uttering a groaning cry and cramming his fingers into his mouth. All eyes turned.

"Fool, Bardolus!" Lord Vengis rapped. "What scares you?"

"In that mirror!" Bardolus gibbered, trying to point and finding his shaking arm disobedient to his will. "I saw in the mirror—!"

"What? What?" chorused a dozen fearful voices.

Bardolus was a small man whose manner was never better than diffident; he was accounted clever, but in a sly fashion that had won him few friends and none who would trust him. He said now, mopping sweat from his face, "I don't know. I saw something in the mirror that wasn't also in this hall."

Time hesitated in its course, until Lord Vengis gave a harsh laugh and slapped the arm of his chair.

"You'll have to become accustomed to manifestations like that, Bardolus!" he gibed. "So long as the things are in the mirror, what's to worry you? It's when they emerge into the everyday world that you must look out. Why, only the other day, when I was in my thaumaturgic cabinet testing a certain formula I—but enough of that." He coughed, and behind his polite covering had glanced to see if his words had had the desired effect. They had, even though the episode to which he referred was an invention. True, he'd spent much time in his cabinet; true, he'd rehearsed many formulae; nothing had so far come of his efforts, not even a harmless shadow in a mirror.

Still, that would change. One could tell by the feel of the air. There were forces in it that no man could put a name to, and sometimes scalps prickled as they do before a thunderstorm.

"We are here for a reason you know," he said after an impressive pause. "We are agreed on the only course open to us. We admit that modern Ys stands on the shoulders of very great men and women; unkind fate has burdened us with such difficulties as they never encountered, and we eat stale bread and rancid meat where they ate pies running with gravy and soft delicious fruits from the ends of the earth. We drink plain water, none too clean, where they enjoyed wine and mead and beer like brown crystal.

"We have agreed that for all their—admitted—greatness, *they* are responsible, not us! We did not ask to be born at a time when our trees die, our crops wither, our harbour is blocked. In every way they are responsible: for siting Ys where it stands, for breeding children to inherit such a miserable legacy!"

"Ay!" came a rumble of assent from all around the hall.

"Some faint-hearts, some ignorant fools, have argued with us," Vengis went on, warming to a speech he hadn't intended to deliver at length. "These, of course, were base-born, lacking the insight which nobility gives. Jacques the scrivener, for example, would have had us turn to with hoes and shovels and clear the harbour with our bare hands!"

This time, it was a chuckle that circled the hall. "What's become of him, by the way?" someone asked audibly.

"Does it matter?" Vengis countered, drawing his beetling brows together. "We know we are doing the right thing. We have decided that we must employ something other than crude—ah—agricultural implements to cope with so massive a disaster. We shall, in short, restore all our fortunes, and the splendour of our city, *and* root out once and for all the disaffection among the common rabble spread by such as Jacques, by using the mightiest means available to us. Magically, by decree of the will, by harnessing supernatural forces, we shall again make Ys the envy of the world!"

A roar of approval and a barrage of clapping went up. Unnoticed in the shadows, one listener alone did not clap,

and he stood leaning on his staff, shaking his head very slowly from side to side.

"Let us have news, then—encouraging news of our progress!" Vengis cried. "I call first on Dame Seulte, around whose home last time I rode by I could not help noticing an aura pregnant with remarkable phenomena."

Silence. At length a portly woman near the back of the hall rose with some difficulty and spoke.

"Dame Seulte, as you know, is my close neighbour, and as she is not here I think perhaps I ought to mention that yesterday she was in high spirits and confident of success. She had obtained a free-will gift of a child to offer to—well, to a creature best not named directly—and was leading the pretty thing home on a leash of green leather. Such a sweet sight!"

"Dame Rosa!" said a man from nearer the front, turning in his chair. "A free-will gift—are you sure?"

And his companion, a pale girl of no more than eighteen in a dress of brown velvet, said doubtfully, "My maid said something about a fire at Dame Seulte's house this morning . . ."

Vengis slapped the arm of his chair again, making a noise as sharp as a gavel's. He said sternly, "No defeatist talk if you please, Lady Vivette!"

"But are you *sure* it was a free-will gift?" persisted the last man who had spoken.

Dame Rosa said stiffly, "Dame Seulte promised to raise the child as her own, and the parents were poor and hungry; they parted willingly with it."

"Then there was a fire at her home this morning," said the man, and shrugged. "My copy of the book she conjured from has a leaf that hers lacks, and on it the authorities are cited by dozens—deception is of no avail with that ceremony."

There was a stunned pause. Dame Seulte, after all, had only been trying to manifest a comparatively straightforward elemental.

"I have better news," said a sweet, enticing voice from the opposite side of the assembly. They turned gratefully; this was Lady Meleagra, whose eyes like sapphires, lips like rose-petals and skin like snow had broken hearts for

ten of her twenty-one years. As Eadwil had once done in Ryovora, she had accepted a basic proviso for her wished-for powers; she, though, had not suffered in consequence, but she had imposed a most regrettable condition upon those who craved to share the pleasures of her chamber at night. It was an efficacious precaution, but the number of suitors calling on her had signally reduced since she imposed the rule.

"I have sensed a change here in Ys," she mused aloud. "A great wonder has overtaken this city. So far I do not know its precise nature, but the fact is indisputable. See!"

She stretched out one graceful arm, swathed in white lace so fine her skin tinted it pink, and in the central aisle dividing the company a thing appeared. It was dark; it writhed, and it had no distinguishable feature except two glowing eyes alight with hatred. It lasted half a minute before it slowly faded, and at its going the air was full of a dank steamy odour against which those lucky enough to have brought them buried their noses in bouquets of flowers.

By degrees a clamour arose, as on all sides the nobles strove to show that they had been equally successful. "Look!" cried Messer Hautnoix, and between his hands he strung a chain of gleaming bubbles from nowhere, and again, and yet a third time before the glamour faded. And: "See!" cried Dame Faussein, shaking a drum made of a gourd capped either end with tattooed skin from a drowned sailor; this made the hall pitch-black for as long as it sounded, and all present had the eerie sense that they were adrift in an infinite void. And: "Watch!" bellowed rough old Messer d'Icque, spreading a scarlet cloth at the full stretch of both arms; on the cloth, a mouth opened and uttered five sonorous words that no one present understood.

Smiles greeted these achievements, and loud approbation gave place to a babble of inquiry as to means—"Five nights drunk under a gallows!" boasted Messer Hautnoix; "A day and a night and a day kissing the mouth of the man who bequeathed his skin!" bragged Dame Faussein; "Doing things to a goat I can't discuss with ladies present," Messer d'Icque muttered behind his hand.

"But that creature came to me when I did no more than call on him," Meleagra said, and at these disturbing words those closest to her chair drew as far back as they could from her without appearing rude.

Vengis on his high chair joined neither in the praising nor in the questioning; his heavy-jowled face remained set as stone. Had he not submitted himself to worse indignities? Had he not made pledges which in retrospect made him quail inwardly? And nothing had yet come from all his struggles—not even a pretty tricksiness like Messer Hautnoix's shining bubbles!

He thumped on his chair-side again, and cut through the chatter with a furious roar. "Enough! Enough! Are you children early out of school, that you disgrace our meeting with mere gossip? How far do these cantrips advance us to our goal? That's the question!"

A little embarrassed at their own enthusiasm, the company subsided into a period of asking each other with their eyes if any was bold enough to claim success in the central problem. At first they avoided looking at Meleagra; then, no other offer being forthcoming, they took that plunge and were rewarded with a sigh and a shake of the head.

"As I thought," Vengis crowed in scorn. "You're overwhelmed with bright spectacle and have forgotten the urgent need confronting us. Next time you go to conjure, ask yourselves first this: if I succeed, what comes by way of benefit? Can I eat it? Can I put it on my back, or mend my roof with it? In fine, how will it serve not only me, but the community and nobility of Ys?"

He glared at the now fidgety assembly. "It's not going to be easy, I know that well. I've had no success to speak of, myself. But at least I haven't been diverted down illusory byways!"

The one standing unnoticed in shadow shook his head once more. Here truly was a company of fools, and chief of them their chief Vengis: a man of consuming arrogance and vanity, blind to his faults and proud beyond description. In which case . . .

He gave a gentle cough, and heads whisked around to see from whom the noise issued. Vengis half-rose from his seat in astonishment.

"What are you doing here?" he thundered. "Who let you in without my leave?"

The traveller in black walked without a sound along the aisle dividing the company until he was face to face with Vengis, and there was that in his eyes which stifled further speech prior to the answering of the double question.

At last he said, "As to what I am doing here, I have been listening and considering what you've said. As to the leave that was granted me, I go where my presence is required, whether you wish it or no."

The ranked nobles of the city held their breath. This was the speech of one holding an authority they dared not challenge.

"What—what do you want of us?" whispered Vengis when he had regained some of his composure.

"Say rather what you want of me," the traveller countered with a sardonic cock of his head. "From the confusion of your meeting here I've been unable to make it out. Put it in words for me. That is, if you are sure you know what you are after . . . ?"

There was a gently insulting turn to that last phrase. Vengis bridled.

"Of course we know!" he blustered. "Have you not seen the miserable pass to which our fair city is reduced?"

"I have," acknowledged the one in black. "And as nearly as I can discern, you hold your ancestors to blame."

"We do so!" Vengis snapped. "And we seek to make them rectify their fault. We seek to call them back, that they may behold the ruin they have bequeathed to us, and compel them to save us."

"Compulsion is no part of my task," said the one in black. "I know only choice. And you say you have chosen; what then restrains you from action?"

"What do you think?" That was Bardolus, half-frantic with the tension of the moment. "We want the power to bring it about, and so far all we've managed to achieve is some minor manifestations and a few personal calamities like the one which now overtakes Dame Seulte!"

"Is this the desire of you all?" said the traveller with very great sadness, casting his burning gaze to the furthest corners of the company.

"Ay!" came the chorus of replies.

"As you wish," said the traveller softly, "so be it."

Where he went, none of them saw. He passed from among them swiftly as thought, silently as shadows, and they had no more stomach for their consultations once he had departed. Yet they felt a lightness, a sense of promise, as they called to the servants to unbar the doors and made their several ways towards their homes.

The streets by which they passed seemed more crowded than of late, and not a few of them had the impression that they recognised among the throng a familiar face, a known gait, or a garment of distinctive cut. However, such ideas were of a piece with the general mood, and served only to heighten the taut anticipation they had brought away from the hall.

"What think you of Dame Seulte's fate?" said the Lady Vivette to her companion—who was also her brother, but they had judged that an advantage in making their earlier experiments. She spoke as their carriage creaked and jolted over the courtyard of their ancestral home, a short ride only from the Hall of State; behind, the hinges of the gates complained of rust and lack of oil when the retainers forced them too.

"I think she was unwise," her brother said. His name was Ormond to the world, but recently he had adopted another during a midnight ritual, and Vivette knew what it was and held some power over him in consequence.

"Do you believe that we have been gifted by this—this personage?" Vivette insisted.

"We can but try," shrugged Ormond. And added, "Shall we now, or wait till after dinner?"

"Now," Vivette said positively. "I have a feeling . . ."

So, duly, they made their preparations: putting on fantastical garments which contained surprising lacunae, and over these items of no further use to their original owners, such as a necklace of children's eyes contained in glass for Vivette and a mask made from a horse's head for Ormond. Arrayed, they repaired to a room in the high

tower of the mansion, where by custom the heads of their family had been laid in state for a day and a night before burial since untold generations.

There, in a pentacle bounded by four braziers and a pot of boiling wax over a lamp, they indulged in some not unpleasurable pastimes, taking care to recite continually turn and turn about a series of impressive cantrips. The room darkened as they went on, and great excitement almost interrupted their concentration, but they stuck to it and . . .

"Look!" whispered Vivette, and pointed to the catafalque removed to the corner of the room. Under the black velvet draperies a form was lying—that of a man armed and armoured.

"Why! Just so, in the picture downstairs, did Honorius our great-grandfather lie when he was waiting burial!" Ormond snapped, and leapt to his feet to pull back the velvet.

Impassive, a steel visor confronted them, Vivette pushed it open, and in the dark interior of the helmet eyes opened and a rush of foetid breath began. Stiffly, with effort, the occupant of the armour arose from the catafalque.

"Come, let me kiss you both," said a rusty voice, and the arms resistlessly encircled them, though they struggled to get away. "What, have you no feeling for your own kin?"

There was a hollow hideous chuckle, and strong as the steel enclosing them the arms forced them close; the horse-mask went thudding to the floor, and spittle-wet lips clamped on one mouth, then the other.

Both fainted. When they recovered, the figure in armour was gone, but where it had taken shape on the catafalque lay a manuscript book in bindings of leather and brass, open to the page recording the death of Honorius from a contagious fever against which no medicine was of use, in the three-and-thirtieth year of his age.

Dame Rosa, in her palanquin borne between two white female donkeys, passed the corner on which stood the house formerly owned by Dame Seulte, and drew aside the

curtains to peer curiously upward. Sure enough, from the window of the room in which her friend had been accustomed to conduct her experiments, a licking tongue of greasy black smoke had smeared the walls.

She clucked with her tongue. Poor Seulite! Had she but waited another day she might have had the full fruit of her efforts. That at least was Dame Rosa's belief; she trusted the promise the one in black had made, and looked forward with impatience to the earliest moment she could closet herself with her books and apparatus and rehearse with improvements the most promising of her formulae.

Her family had in the past numbered among the most lascivious of Ys, and excessive indulgence by the women-folk in the pleasures of the bed had often threatened to overpopulate the resources of their not inconsiderable estates. Accordingly there was a cellar where excess children had been discreetly disposed of, not by any crude and direct means but by consigning their nourishment to the fates. She entered this cellar by a bronze door, which she locked with a heavy key, and passed between rows of wooden stalls in each of which a set of rat-gnawed bones lay on foul straw, gyves about one ankle.

She had chosen this place after much thought; surely, she reasoned, the point of departure to eternity of so many spirits must have a peculiar potency!

Her method of working involved feathers, four liquids of which the least noxious was fresh blood, and long silent concentration while seated on a stool of unique design with no other covering for her ample frame than her age-sparse hair would afford. Briskly she carried out the introductory rites; then she sat down and closed her eyes, shivering from excitement and not from cold.

She had, the books stated, to keep her eyes shut until she had completed the recital of a cantrip that lasted eight whole pages in minuscule script. There were two pages to go when she heard the first rustlings and clicketings behind her. There was one page to go when the first touch came on her fleshy thigh. Desperately wanting to know what marvels her work had brought about, she raced through the last page, and on the concluding word came the first *bite*.

Thirty starving children, mad with hunger and their teeth keen as any rat's, left gnaw-marks on her bones too.

Bardolus trembled as he piled the curious ingredients high on the charcoal-filled brazier before his mirror. He had chosen the mirror spell out of those known to him because he had, after all, come closest to success with it before—even if he had been taken aback to see a manifestation in the unconstrained mirror of the Hall of State.

He wished he could find the courage to abandon the entire project, but fear and conceit combined to drive him on. He was beside himself with jealousy to think that a slip of a girl like Meleagra—not to mention that coarse peasant type d'Icque, or stupid complacent Dame Faussein!—had mastered simple powers while he still cried out in terror at the consequences of his own thaumaturgy.

He struck a light and ignited the pile. Saturated with the fat of a sow that had devoured her own farrow, it blazed up and gave off a choking smoke that veiled the mirror till it was all consumed.

Then the air cleared, and in the mirror was a face he knew: that of his own mother.

"My son Bardolus," she said with fawning sweetness. "Look behind you. There is an oaken cupboard which you have known since you were a child. Press the last knob in the carved design, and a drawer will open. In the drawer is that which gave me power over your father. Take it as my gift."

The image faded. A little puzzled, Bardolus hesitated before doing as directed. He remembered his father only dimly; he had been a strange man, alternating between hysterical gaiety and depression so deep he would sit by the hour contemplating a knife or a dish of poison, plucking up the courage to take his own life.

Yet—power.

He pressed the knob and the drawer slid open, revealing a packet made of a strange yellow paper and sealed with green wax. He broke the seal convulsively, and a fine powder drifted up from it, seeming to seek his nostrils of its own accord. He tried to dodge, but it was useless; he inhaled it all, and the packet lay empty on his palm.

Another few seconds, and vast elation filled him. Why, he could do anything! He was ten feet tall, stronger than an ox, more potent than the heroes of legend and so handsome no wench could withstand him if he courted her!

He threw down the packet and raced towards the street.

From the mirror drifted mists, that coalesced into the shape of his mother, and ultimately grew strong enough to take up the empty packet in gnarled old fingers and regard it out of bleary eyes.

"You deserve no better fate than the one who got you on my body against my will," she whispered. "One hour, Bardolus—one hour of delirium! And afterwards despair. For it will be no use hunting for more of the drug, Bardolus! I never compounded more than one dose at a time, and it was by postponing for a day the next mixing that I held power over your father. There is no one to mix it for you, Bardolus! No one at all!"

But these were not all the calamities that overtook Ys, the once-fair city. For those whom the black-clad traveller had challenged truly did not know what they were after, and for fear of letting slip a unique opportunity had demanded as much as they could conceive. Lost in this plethora of plenty—somewhere—was precisely and exactly what was needful: that much the traveller was bound to grant. But as he had warned, he had nothing to do with compulsion. Choice was what he understood.

And those who made a wrong choice did so because of what they were.

His friends had generally liked Messer Hautnoix, who was engagingly like a child with his delight in such baubles as the pretty coloured bubbles he had displayed to the nobles of the city; it was characteristic of him that, compelled to spend five nights under a gallows for the privilege, he spent the entire time drunk to avoid excessive contemplation of his situation.

Yet when he repaired to his chosen ground of the execution dock and chuckled while he cut the throat of a white cock and a black hen, the one who came to him proved to be the first bearer of his line's name, professionally the municipal hangman, who had so loved his work

that more than once he bought the silence of witnesses that would have saved victims from the rope; this being discovered, they had set him swinging on his own gallows at the last.

Much time having passed since he had performed his welcome task, he seized his chance with both hands, and sunset found Messer Hautnoix dangling from a noose while his forebear walked back to the city gate, rubbing his bloated hands to think of what was promised.

Dame Faussein, who had paid a drowned man so generously for the loan of his skin, made further use of her curious little drum when she came home, thinking that the tried and tested means must be superior to any not yet proved workable. It was regrettable—and she certainly regretted it—that this time the darkness to which its beating carried her was the musty interior of her ancestral vaults, where the warmth of her living body, so long as it lasted, gave strange comfort to an aunt and two uncles whose relationship even now was more complex than the ordinary ties of kinship; her eyes continued to perceive darkness when the three together had lifted off the enclosing marble lid of their mausoleum and gone to see how Ys now stood.

Messer d'Ique was indeed of peasant stock—that was no secret in Ys. His inclinations were towards country matters, and it has never been any secret anywhere that events transpire in lonely country districts at which the sophisticated of the cities invariably wonder or grow nauseated. The whole of his city residence had been stunk out for weeks by a dung-pile he had had made in the central courtyard, because it was said to be in the warmth of rotting manure that homunculi came to artificial life. This heap of foulness he passed by today, however; his mind was set on the proper employment of his stock of what the French call *animelles*, a springtime by-product on farms where sheep and cattle are bred. His plan was not, moreover, to cook and serve them as a seasonal delicacy.

To him came a progenitor who had felt the frustration of an ageing wife, racked with child-bearing, and had turned to the daughter of his bailiff; it being Spring. The bailiff had returned early from the task of which the *animelles* were typically a by-product, and had made use of the implement

in hand to avenge the slight to his family honour. For twenty-one generations the sufferer had sought the chance to inflict on another the operation performed on himself, and he did so without asking permission upon Messer d'Icque as the subject convenient to him. After that he set forth to multiply his valued possessions from all possible male sources.

No word of this had been brought to the beauteous Meleagra when she came home. She had never cared for Messer d'Icque, thinking him rough and ill-bred, and the news that he had been involuntarily qualified to share her overnight company would have interested her not at all.

In a boudoir hung with lace draperies, containing a round golden bed and a mirror abstracted from the Hall of State as being the largest in Ys—which she had mounted cunningly on the ceiling—she caused her maids first to draw all the curtains at the many high windows, then to light candles which gave off a fragrant, intoxicating aroma. She suffered them to remove her clothing, to prepare her a bath in which she dissolved a handful of polychrome salts, and to sing in harmony while they sponged her from head to toe. Sweetmeats were brought on a white platter and a silver filigree dish, and twenty-four new gowns were displayed before her on the body of a dumb girl who matched the dimensions of her figure.

All the while this was going on, she was musing over a crucial decision: should she, or should she not, act upon the promise the black-clad one had made?

That he had the power to which he laid claim, she never doubted. Two years before anyone else in Ys saw what needed to be done, she had closed the bargain about her virginity which she had scrupulously kept—at first purely from determination, but latterly partly from honest fear.

And what she had purchased with this bargain had enabled her to recognise the single nature of their unaccountable visitor.

A single nature! It implied that the possessor of it could neither lie nor deceive, surely . . . ? In which case she might employ her talents and be safe as she ever was. Her

whole life since the age of eleven had been on the edge of a precipice, and there were creatures at the bottom of the chasm she had eluded only by extreme foresight and planning.

She had naturally said nothing of what she had learned to anyone else. It had been an uncharacteristic yielding to vanity which made her call Ub-Shebbab to the Hall of State—the purpose had been to discountenance Vengis because he was a boastful donkey. The mark had been struck. Yet Ub-Shebbab was the meekest and mildest of the beings she had called up.

Why share her hard-bought knowledge with fools and bunglers? Let disaster overtake them in due time. Meanwhile, she herself . . .

In the end, it was curiosity as much as anything that decided her. She dismissed her maids and put on a gown that had not been displayed during her bath, worked all over in gold wire with a single sentence in a forgotten language; then she opened a brass chest and took out gifts she had exacted from various suitors in the days before information about her inflexible rule was noised abroad.

There was a twig from Yorbeth, bearing a leaf transparent as glass and a brown, blotched fruit which tinkled like a bell; there was a vial of rain water caught at the foot of the rainbow overarching Barbizond, that had a trifle of Sardhin's essence in it; there was a block of pumice from the volcano where Fegrim slumbered; there was a jar of grey dust from the hill where Laprivan was shut away; there was a hair from the head of Farchgrind, an inch of candle that had revealed the secret thoughts of Wolpec but had been allowed to burn one instant longer than was safe, and a drawing of two birds and a crocodile made by a possessed child.

Also there was a book.

Following with care the instructions it contained, she danced around her boudoir keening, went twice backwards across the floor with a knife between her teeth, and at last cut her forearm and let three drops of her blood fall on the carpet. When she looked again the stains had vanished.

Nothing else happened in the room. She had expected that; humming, she changed her gown for something more

conventional and went down to the dining-hall where supper was to be served.

Already as she approached it she could hear the clatter of dishes, the murmur of conversation. That boded a great company. She hurried the last few steps and threw open the door.

Every place at her great table—and there were thirty-six—was taken; the servants had pressed into use benches from the kitchen, too, and the sideboards and the serving-tables were alike packed with a hungry horde. For all the scullions and maids could do, the food, brought on trolleys because there was more of it than a man could lift, disappeared within instants of being set down. The bread had gone, the meat, the wine; now it was boiled turnips and hedge-greens, broth of bones and barley, and beer too new to serve by ordinary.

Yet that was not all. Behind, between, among those who ate went others looting. The fine brocade drapes had been torn down to clothe naked bodies, leather-backed chairs stripped to afford protection to sore feet, tapestries turned to cloaks and ponchos. One wild-eyed woman, lacking anything else, had smeared herself with gravy to break up the maggot pallidity of her skin.

Meleagra stood in the doorway for a long heartbeat of time before the chief steward caught sight of her and came running to beg for help.

"Mistress, what shall we do? They are in every room—five hundred of them at the last count! And all, all have the right to what you have, for they say they are your ancestors and this is their home!"

"That is so," whispered Meleagra. Her eyes, drawn by a magnet, went to him who had taken her seat at the head of the table, and a silence overcame the entire company.

The one at whom she gazed was a cross-eyed, ill-favoured fellow in a dirty doublet, unshaven and with black around his nails. He gave her a smile that showed gapped yellow teeth, and spoke in a soft voice with a peasant's accent.

"We are in your debt, Meleagra, that you set you: table for us and bid us back to enjoy what was ours and shall

be again! You have worked most potent magic, child; the family is proud of you."

"Who—who are you?" she choked out.

"Damien, who built the house and founded the family's fortune in the earliest days of Ys. And at my side Cosimo, my first-born here—though I had byblows aplenty in another town! And Syriax his wife and their children Ruslan, Roland and Igraine, and their children Mark, Valetta, Corin, Ludovic, Matthaus, Letty, Seamus; theirs, Orlando, Hugo, Dianne, twins Nathaniel and Enoch —"

"Stop! Stop!" Meleagra put her hands to her temples; the room seemed to be spinning, and from every side gross faces leered at her, or thin drawn faces gazed in stony regard, or dull faces moped, or . . .

"There is no more food!" the steward shouted. "We have killed all the poultry, the pantry is bare, the wine-casks are drained, the last carp is gone from the pond, the beer-barrels are exhausted and even the well is dry!"

"You've done this to me, for that I gave you breath and life and this new opportunity?" Melcagra whispered to her remotest ancestor Damien.

"What do we care for you?" said Damien with contempt. "We are here and alive, your ancestors; how then can you be of importance? Here we are alive, who died before you saw the light—how then can you be mistress in this house? You are a thing not thought of, less than dust for dust can be seen to dance in sunbeams. You are the flame of a candle guttering out. So—*poof!*"

He blew at the candle closest him upon the great table, and with the death of its flame there was no such person as Meleagra—never had been—never could be.

Long hours Lord Vengis had paced in the high room above the Hall of State, pondering the day's events and screwing himself to the point where he would again begin his rituals. The day wasted; shadows lengthened; evening cold began to permeate the building and he called for fire.

He was afraid.

He had seen in the eyes of the traveller in black a warn-

ing which his pride forbade him to heed; he was ashamed because he was afraid, yet shame could not break fear's grip. He wished to do as doubtless many others were doing—what if he alone remained untalented in sorcery when blockheads like Bardolus or half-grown wenches like Vivette boasted powers unnameable?

Nonetheless, he dithered and delayed, and had not yet cast the first runes nor recited the first line of any formula when the sergeant of the guard came stiffly to report a disturbance in the town.

"Disturbance?" rapped Vengis. "Man, be precise! What do you mean?"

"Why, sir"—and the sergeant rubbed his chin dolefully—"some hours agone therc were complaints of desecration in the graveyard by the cathedral, the curate saying that a vault was open and the bones removed, but seeing as how we've had call for similar extraordinary materials that your lordship required I decided best not to say anything. Now, though, it's serious, and the side wall of the building here is cracked where they entombed alive a woman named Igraine—you've seen the plaque—accused of commerce with a familiar spirit in the guise of a cat . . ."

From the street outside came a howl as of maddened beasts, and the sergeant flinched visibly. But he continued in his best official manner.

"Then, your lordship, at dusk reports came of strangers in the city and we called out the patrols for fear of infiltration by some jealous invader. Myself, I've stopped twenty-one persons and all spoke with the accent of the city and gave names that fit our habits, but it seems I've seen all those names on gravestones before now—some, indeed, earlier today when I answered the complaint at the cathedral. And what brings me in to you, begging your pardon, is the curious business of the man and two wives."

"What?" whispered Vengis, sweat pearlting his face.

"Well, sir . . . There was this man, whom I'd challenged, walking with a girl of fifteen-odd, and comes up from nowhere a woman aged as he was—forty, maybe—and says she is his wife and what's this hussy doing with her husband? So the little girl says they were married legally and then there follows screaming of insults and hair-

pulling and at the last we must clap 'em in the jail. Which is—uh—difficult. For every cell, they tell me, is full, and that's more than I can understand; this morning the records say there were one hundred and one places vacant for new prisoners."

Vengis's voice had failed him. He could not speak, but chewed his nails and stared with burning eyes at the sergeant.

"What shall I do, your lordship?" the man finally asked.

"I—I . . ." Vengis spun around and strode to the window overlooking the main square. He thrust the casement open and leaned out. By the last dim light of the dying day he could see a myriad people gathering. Some were colourful and substantial, but these were few; most were grey as the stones they trod, and they trailed curious wispy streamers behind them, like cobwebs. But all alike had the same air of bewilderment, as though they were lost in the mazes of time and eternity, and could not find the way back to the present moment.

Vengis began to babble incoherently.

There came a thundering knock at the door of the room where they were, and a cavernous groaning voice said, "Open! Open in the name of the Lord of Ys!"

Shrugging, the sergeant made to obey, but Vengis came after him, clawing madly at his arm. "Don't! Don't let them in!" he wailed.

"But, your lordship," said the sergeant firmly, "it is in your name that they demand entry, so it must be a matter of importance. Indeed, with your permission, I'm expecting further reports from my patrols."

Vengis searched the room with feverish eyes. In the far corner he spied a cupboard large as a man; he dashed to it, and slammed the door behind him.

The sergeant, astonished, went nonetheless to answer the knock, and fell back in dismay before the apparition which confronted him. Gaunt, tall, with a second mouth gaping redly in his throat, was the figure of legendary Lord Gaze-mon who had laid the first stone of the city with his own two hands.

Now those hands held a broadsword; now he advanced

with slow terrible steps upon the closet in which Vengis thought to secrete himself, and battered down the planks of the door to hail that miserable successor of his into the wan torchlight.

"You know me?" croaked the city's founder.

Gulping, moaning, Vengis contrived a nod, and the huge spectre shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. "Oh, to what a miserable stature have shrunk these weaklings of today!" he bellowed. The sergeant, cowering in the opposite corner, could not tell by which mouth Gazemon spoke—his natural one, or the second which had let out his life.

Again the door rattled to an imperious knock, and he scuttled to answer before Gazemon could address him. With trembling hands he admitted those who stood without: Lorin, who had slain Gazemon by treachery and usurped his throne, Angus, who had taken the throne back into the rightful line of descent; then Caed, then Dame Degrance who passed for a man and ruled like one until the physicians at her deathbed unmasked her sex, then Walter of Meux, then Auberon, then Lams and the first Vengis who was a stout and brave leader for the one short year he survived, and others and others to the latest who had sat the chair below before this current weakling.

With axes, maces, swords, with pens and scrolls and money-changer's scales according to the sort of power by which they had made Ys great, they gathered around the hapless victim of their contempt.

"We have been abroad in the city since we were called from rest," rumbled Gazemon, his grip still fast on Vengis's shoulder. "We have seen the stagnant puddles in the streets, the shutters dangling from one hinge on the cracked walls of the fine houses, the dirty beggars and the starving children in this which we all gave our lives to make into a city that the world should envy! You have given our golden towers to tarnish, our iron doors to rust; you have given our splendid harbour to the mud and our fat grain-fields to the weeds; you have squandered our treasury on baubles when we bought it with blood. How say you all, you who listen here? Is it not time that we held an accounting?"

"Ay, time," they said as one, and hearing the menace in

the voices Vengis rolled his eyes upward in their sockets and let go his hold on life.

"Oh, there you are!"

Perched on a rock at the top of the grey hill, Jacques turned and forwent his gazing at sunset-gilded Ys in favour of a scowl at the traveller in black who had come to join him. There were no footprints to show by which path he had arrived; still, where Laprivan wiped away the past that was no wonder.

"You've been long enough, in all conscience," he complained further. "It's cold here, and for all you promised I should witness the doom of Ys I see nothing but what I've always seen when I looked on the place. Though before you say anything I concede you were correct in describing this hill. I must have missed it somehow when I wandered around in my youth."

"No, that's not the case," the traveller sighed. Now the course of events was grinding to its inexorable conclusion, he felt downcast, despite there never having been an alternative. Also he did not like Jacques, regarding him as too self-righteously opinionated.

"So what's the form this doom will take?" Jacques pressed him.

"It is already in train," the traveller said. He raised his staff and pointed across the twilight grey of the valley. "Do you not see, there by the gate, a certain number of persons making in this direction?"

"Why—yes, I believe I do," Jacques peered hard. "But I cannot make out who they are at this great distance."

"I know who they are."

"Then tell me!"

"They are those of the people of Ys who have remembered you—Jacques the scrivener. And who are now bent on finding you and regulating an account with you. There is a great balancing going on, and you are an uncancelled factor."

"What?" Turned sidewise in the gloaming, Jacques's face was ghastly pale. "Why me? What do they want with me?"

"I will explain if you wish," the traveller agreed wearily, and shifted his grip on his staff to afford a more comfort-

able angle of support. "You must understand first that the would-be enchanters of Ys have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, and have called back—as they desired—those who made the city and visited their present plight on them. And they have found, as was inevitable, that their ancestors were ordinary human beings, with human faults and failings, and not infrequently with remarkable outstanding faults, because this is the way with persons who are remarkable and outstanding in other areas of their lives."

"But—but I counselled against this foolishness!" cried Jacques.

"No," corrected the one in black. "You said: you are pig-headed fools and I am absolutely, unalterably right while everyone else is wrong. And when they would not listen to such dogmatic bragging—as who would?—you washed your hands of them, and even wished them a dreadful doom."

"Did I wish them any worse than they deserved?" Jacques was trying to keep up his front of bravado, but he had to link his fingers to stop his hands from shaking.

"Discuss the matter with those who are coming to find you," suggested the traveller sardonically. "Their belief is opposite to yours; they hold that by making people disgusted with the views you subscribed to, you prevented rational thought from regaining its mastery of Ys. Where you should have reasoned, you flung insults; where you should have argued calmly and with purpose, you castigated honest men with doubts as purblind idiots. This is what they say, and I have no business disagreeing with them. I leave it to you to convince them of the truth—but it seems likely to be a tough task, in view of what they carry."

Jacques looked again at the column of people winding out from the city, and now saw what the traveller referred to. At the head of the line was a blacksmith with a hammer on his shoulder; behind him, a ditcher came with a mattock, then a gardener with a sickle and two coopers with heavy barrel-staves. And those behind still bore each their handiest weapon, down to a red-handed goodwife wielding the stick from her butter churn.

"But—but—" Jacques leapt to his feet, glancing wildly around for a way of escape. "You must stop them! You told me to come here, and I think you knew this would happen if I did!"

"It happened because you wished to witness the doom of Ys," said the traveller. "You did not stop to ask if that doom was one you must share to witness it."

Slightly louder, for Jacques had begun to stumble down hill into the gathering night, he added, "Running away won't help for long, my friend. Those are incredibly determined people yonder; though you hid in the pit of Fegrím's volcano, they would track you down."

"Is there nothing I can do?" moaned Jacques. "How can I stop them from coming after me? Tell me! Tell me!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and cheered up somewhat, for that put a very satisfactory end to this momentary aberration in the smooth course of the cosmos. It had happened, which was bad, but now it would cease, which was good.

He tapped three times on a nearby rock, and under his breath he said, "Laprivan! Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes!"

Jacques screamed.

Below, in the valley, the column of determinedly advancing men and women bound to wreak their vengeance on Jacques hesitated, halted, and broke in disorder that grew to panic. For out of the side of his hill Laprivan was peering, and what was behind his eyes belonged to the age when chaos was the All.

Some small power remained to him so long as he survived, and he put it to this single and unique purpose: to wipe clean the slate of yesterday.

So he looked down on Ys, and saw there what was to him an abomination: the shadows of the past given substance. He reached out one of his arms, and erased—and erased—and erased . . .

Honorius, sowing his contagious fever on the streets, was not.

Thirty sated children, smeared with blood on faces and fingers, were not.

Bardolus's mother, chortling over the fate of her son, was not.

Knotting a noose from every rope in a cord-seller's shop, the first of the line of the Hautnoix was not.

Brandishing his bloody trophies, the adultcrous d'Icque was not.

Three who had come forth from a vault were not.

Stripped of its food, its draperies, its gold and silver and precious artworks, the house of Meleagra was silent.

And those who had come to regulate accounts with the decadent lordling Vengis took their leave.

Also many who had come forth from graves and sepulchres, from hollow walls and wayside ditches, from dungeons and the heds of rivers and the bottoms of wells —were not.

"So!" said the traveller in black, when he had restored Laprivan to his captivity. "You have a reprieve, Jacques —are you glad of that?"

The tawny-hearded man beside him moaned an affirmative.

"And will you learn a lesson from it?"

"I'll try—as heaven is my witness, I will try!"

"Fairly said," the traveller declared. "Go then after those who are hiding in the valley. Approach them as a friend, not showing that you know why they set forth with cudgels and bludgeons. Say to them that the rule of chaos in Ys is ended, and so is Ys; they must return home for the last time and pack their belongings before they and all the people scatter to the ends of the earth."

"But—is this earth?" Jacques whimpered. "On the way to Barhizond—and now here—I've seen . . ."

"Don't worry. You'll have no more of that. It belongs to yesterday, and with other traces of yesterday Laprivan has wiped it out." The traveller allowed himself a smile. "And do not lament excessively for Ys. For cities, as for men, there comes a Time . . . Besides, there is a prophecy: a prince shall seek a name for his new capital, and he'll be told of Ys, and out of envy for its greatness he will say, 'I name my city Parys, *equal to Ys*.'"

"I have little faith in prophecies as a rule," said Jacques, staring. "But in this extraordinary place . . . Well, no

matter. Sir, I take my leave of you—and I thank you. You have held up an honest mirror to me, and I cannot resent that."

"Go now," the traveller said. "Be quick."

He waited long on the brow of the hill while the last daylight dwindled away and the stars wheeled gradually to the angle marking midnight. It became more and more difficult to see Ys: the towers melted into mist, the walls and gates were shadow-dark among shadows. For a while torches glimmered; then even they failed to be seen any longer, and when dawn came there was neither the city, nor the traveller in black, for anyone to behold.

— JOHN BRUNNER

*The first of two parts*

# HOMECALLING\*

by Judith Merril

*It's astonishing how many fundamental assumptions, which are never questioned, arise from what we refer to as the "natural order" of things. And, so far as human beings go, these assumptions are mostly quite sound. But a race of beings which we would call "alien" would have quite different fundamental assumptions, rooted in different "natural orders". Judith Merril has presented here a fascinating and convincing picture of the thought-processes of a different species on a far world; and no little part of this arises from the fact that the *Lady of the House* could be so rationally intelligent, so logical and likeable—and wrong!*

There was no warning. Deborah heard her mother shout, "*Dee! Grab the baby!*"

Petey's limbs hung loose; his pink young mouth fell open as he bounced off the foam-padded floor of the play-space, hit more foam on the sidewall at a neat ninety-degree angle, and bounced once more. The small ship finished upending itself, lost the last of its spin, and hurled itself surfaceward under constant acceleration. Wall turned to ceiling, ceiling to floor and Petey landed smack on his fat bottom against the foam-protected toy-bin. Unhurt but horrified, he added a lusty wail to the evershriller screaming of the alien atmosphere, and the mighty reverberations of the rocket's thunder.

"... the bay-beeee . . . *Dee!*"

"I got him." Deborah hooked a finger finally through her brother's overall strap, and demanded: "What do I do now?"

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"I don't know ; hold on to him. Wait a minute." Sarah Levin turned her head with difficulty toward her husband. "John," she whispered, "what's going to happen?"

He gnawed at his lower lip, tried to quirk a smile out of the side of his mouth nearest her. "Not good," he said, very low.

"The children?"

"Dunno." He struggled with levers, frantically trying to fire the tail rockets—now, after their sudden space-somersault become the forward jets. "Don't know what's wrong," he muttered fiercely.

"Mommy, it hurts . . ."

Petey was really crying now, low and steady sobbing, and Dee whimpered again, "It hurts. I can't get up."

"Daddy's trying to fix it." Sarah said. "Dee . . . listen . . ." It was hard to talk. "If you can, try to . . . kind of . . . wrap yourself around Petey . . ."

"I can't . . ." Deborah too broke into sobs.

Seconds of waiting, slow eternal seconds ; then incredibly, a gout of flame burst out ahead of them.

The braking force of the forward rocket eased the pressure inside, and Dee ricocheted off a foamed surface—wall, floor ceiling? She didn't know—her finger still stuck tight through Petey's strap. The ground, strange orange-red terrain with towering bluish trees, was close. Too close. There was barely time before the crash for Sarah to shout a last reminder.

" . . . right around him!" she yelled. Dee understood ; she pulled her baby brother close to her chest and wound her arms and legs around his body. Then there was crashing splintering, jagged noise through all the world.

It was too warm. Dee didn't want to look, but she opened an eye.

Nothing to see but foam-padded sides of the play space, with the toys scattered all over.

A bell jangled, and a mechanical voice began: "Fire . . . Fire . . . Fire . . . Fire . . ." Dee knew what to do. She wondered about letting go of Petey, but she'd have to, she couldn't ask her mother, because the safety door was closed. Her mother and father were both

on the other side in front—that was where the fire would be. She wondered if they'd get burned up, but let go of Petey, and worked the escape lock the way she'd been taught. While it was opening, she put on Petey's oxy mask and her own. She didn't know for sure whether they would be needed on this planet, but one place they'd been, called Carteld, you had to wear a mask all the time because there wasn't enough oxygen in the air.

She couldn't remember the name of this planet. They'd never been here before, she knew that much; but this must be the one they were coming to, or Daddy wouldn't have started to go down, and everything wouldn't have happened.

That meant probably, at least the air wasn't poisonous. They had spacesuits and helmets on the ship, and Dee had space-suit drill every week; but she was pretty sure she didn't need anything more than the mask here. And there wasn't time for space-suits anyhow.

The lock was all the way open. Deborah went to the door and recoiled before the blast of heat; it was burning *outside*. Now she had to get away, quick.

She picked up Petey looked around at all the toys, and at the closet where her clothes were; at the blackboard, the projector, and the tumbled pile of fruit and crackers on the floor. She bent down and stuffed the pockets of her jumper with the crumbly crackers and smashed sticky fruit. Then she looked around again, and felt the heat coming through the door, and had to leave everything else behind.

She climbed out, and there were flames in back. She ran, with Petey in her arms, though she'd been told never to do that. She ran straight away from the flames, and kept going as long as she could; it was hard work, because her feet sank into the spongy soil at every step. And it was still hot, even when she got away from the rocket. She kept running until she was too tired, and began to stumble, then she slowed down and walked—until Petey began to be too heavy, and she couldn't carry him any more. She stopped, and put him down on the ground and looked him over. He was all right, only he

was wet—very wet—and the whole front of her jumper was wet too, from him.

Deborah scowled, and the baby began to cry. She couldn't stand that, so she smiled and tried playing games with him. Petey wasn't very good at games yet, but he always laughed and stayed happy if she played with him. Sometimes she thought he liked her better than anybody else, even Monimy. He acted that way. Maybe it was because she was closer to his size—a medium size giant in a world full of giant-giants; that's how people would look to Petey.

When he was happy again, she gave him half a cracker from her pocket, and a piece of fruit for his other hand. He tumbled over backwards, and lay down, right on the muddy grounds, smearing the food all over his face and looking sleepy.

Sooner or later, Dee knew, she was going to have to turn around and look back, meanwhile, she sat on the ground, crosslegged, watching Peter fall asleep. She thought about her ancestors, who were pioneers on Pluto, and her father and how brave *he* was. She thought once, very quickly, about her mother, who was maybe all burned up now.

She had to be brave now—as brave and strong as she knew, in her own private self, she really was. Not silly-brave the way grown-ups expected you to be, about things like cuts and antiseptics, but deep-down *important* brave. She was an intrepid explorer on an alien planet, exposed to unknown dangers and trials, with a helpless infant under her wing to protect. She turned around and looked back.

Her own footsteps faced her, curving away out of sight between two tall distant trees. She looked harder in the direction they pointed to, if the fire was still burning, she ought to be able to see it. The trees were far enough apart, and the ground was clear between them—clearer than any ground she'd ever seen before. There were no bushes or branches near the ground, higher than a rocket-launch—tall yellow orange poles with whispering foliage at the top.

The overhead canopy was thick and dark, a changeable ceiling with grey and green and blue fronds stirring in the air. She couldn't see the sky through it all, or see beyond it to find out whether there was any smoke. But that made it dark here, underneath the trees, so Dee was sure she would be able to see the fire, if it was still going.

She got up and followed her own footsteps back, as far as she could go without losing sight of Petey, that was the spot where the trail curved away in a different direction. It curved again, she saw further on; that was strange, because she was sure she'd been going in a straight line when she ran away. The trees all looked so much alike, it would have been hard to tell. She'd heard a story once about a man who went around and around in circles in a forest till he starved to death. It was a good thing that the ground was so soft here, and she could see the footprints so clearly.

Petey was sound asleep. She decided she could leave him alone for a minute. She hadn't seen any wild beasts or animals, or heard anything that sounded dangerous. Deborah started back along her own trail, and at the next bend she saw it, framed between two far trees: the front part of the rocket, still glowing hot, bright orange red like the persimmons Daddy had sent out from Earth one time. That was why she hadn't been able to see it before, the colour was hardly different from the ground on which it stood: just barely redder.

Nothing was burning any more.

"Mommy!" Deborah screamed, and screamed it again at the top of her lungs.

Nothing happened.

She started to run toward the rocket, still calling; then she heard Petey yelling, too. He was awake again and she had to turn around and run back and pick him up. Then she started the trip all over again, much slower. Petey was dripping wet now, and still hollering. And heavy. Dee tried letting him crawl, but it was too slow. Every move he made, he sank into the soft ground an inch or so; then he'd get curious and try to eat the orange dirt off his fingers, so she had to pick him up again.

By the time they got back to the rocket, Dee was wet all

over, plastered with the dirt Petey that had picked up, and too tired even to cry when nobody answered her call.

## II

The lady of the house sat fat with contentment on her couch, and watched the progress of the work. Four of her sons—precision masons all—performed deft manoeuvres with economy and dispatch; a new arch took place before her eyes, enlarged and redesigned to suit her needs.

They started at the floor, sealing the jagged edges a full foot farther back on either side than where the frame had been before. They worked in teams of two, one to stand by and tamp each chip in place with sensitive mandibles, smoothing and firming it into position as it set; the other stepping off to choose a matching piece from the diminishing pile of hard-wood chips, coating it evenly with liquid plastic from his snout and bringing it, ready for placement in the arch, just at the instant that his brother completed the setting of the preceding piece.

Then the exchange in roles: the static partner moving off to make his choice; the second brother setting his new chip in perfect pattern with the rest: Two teams, building the two sides of the arch in rhythmic concert with each other. It was a ritual dance of function and form, chips and plastic, workers and work, each in its way an apparently effortless inevitable detail of the whole. Daydanda gloried in it.

The arch grew taller than ever before, and the Lady's satisfaction grew enormous, while her consort's fluttering excitement mounted. "But *why?*" he asked again, still querulous.

"It is pleasant to watch."

"You will not use it?" He was absurdly hopeful.

"Of course I will!"

"But, Lady . . . Daydanda, my dearest, Mother of our children, this whole thing is unheard of. What sort of example . . .?"

"Have you ever," she demanded coldly, "had cause to regret the example I set to my children?"

"No, no my dear, but . . ."

She withdrew her attention entirely, and gave herself over to the pure aesthetic delight of watching her sons—the two teams of masons—working overhead now on the final span of the arch, approaching each other with perfect timing and matched instantaneous motions, preparing to meet and place the ceremonial centre-piece together.

Soon she would, rise, take her husband's arm and experience—for the first time since her initial Family came to growth—the infinite pleasure of walking erect through her own door into the next chamber.

Even the report, shortly afterwards, of a fire spreading on the eastern boundary, failed to diminish her pleasure. She assigned three fliers to investigate the trouble, and dismissed it from her mind.

### III

For a long, long time Deborah sat still on the ground, hugging Petey on her lap, not caring how wet he was, nor even trying to stop his crying—except that she rocked gently back and forth in a tradition as ancient as it was instinctive. After a while, the baby was asleep; but the girl still sat cross-legged on the ground, her shoulders moving rhythmically, slower and slower, until the swaying was almost imperceptible.

The rocket—the shiny rocket that had been new and expensive a little while ago—lay helpless on its side. The nozzles in the tail, now quiet and cool, had spouted flame across a streak of surface that stretched farther back than Dee could see, leaving a Hallowe'en trail of scorched black across the orange ground. Up forward, where the fire in the ship had been, there was nothing to see but the still-red glow of the hull.

Deborah tried to figure out what flames she had seen when she left the ship with Petey; but it didn't make sense, and she hadn't looked long enough to be sure. She'd

been taught what to do in case of fire: *get out!* She'd done it; and now . . . The lock was still open where she'd climbed out before. Very very carefully, not to wake him she laid her baby brother on the soft ground, and step by reluctant step she approached the ship. Near the lock, she could feel heat; but it was all coming from one direction—from the nose, and not from inside. She touched a yellow clay stained finger to the lock itself, and felt the wall inside, and found it cool. She took a deep breath, ignored the one tear that forced its way out of her right eye, and climbed up into the rocket.

It was quiet in there. Dee didn't know what kind of noise she'd expected, until she remembered the last voice she'd heard when she left, saying calmly, "Fire . . . fire . . . fire . . ."

She thought that out and knew the fire had stopped; then it was all right to open the safety door to the front part. Maybe . . . maybe they weren't hurt or anything; maybe they just couldn't hear her call. If there was just a *little* fire in there, it might have damaged the controls so they couldn't open the door for instance.

She knew where the controls on her side were, and how to work them. Her hand was on the knob when she had the thought, and then she was afraid. She knew from T.Z.'s how a burning body smelled; and she remembered how hot the *outside* of the hull was.

Her hand withdrew from the knob, returned, and then withdrew again, without consulting her at all.

That wasn't any *little* fire.

If they were all right, they'd find some way to open the door themselves; Daddy could always figure out something like that.

*If people ask, she told herself, I'll tell them I didn't know how.*

"Mommy," she said out loud. "Mommy, please . . ."

Then she remembered the tube. She ran to it and took the speaker off the hook, fumbling with impatience so that it fell from her hand and dangled on its cord. It buzzed the way it should; it was working!

She grabbed at it, and shouted into it. "Mommy!"

Daddy! Where are you?" That was a silly thing to say. "Please answer me. Please. Please!" I'll be good all the rest of my life, she promised silently and faithfully, all the rest of my life, if you answer me.

But no one answered.

She didn't think about the door controls again. After a while she found she could look around without really *seeing* the locked safety door. She had only to try a little, and she could make-believe it was a wall just like the side-walls, that belonged there.

Eight and a half years is a short span of time to an adult; no one seriously expects very much of a child that age. But almost nine years is a long time when you're growing up, and more than time enough to learn a great many things.

Besides the sealed-off control room, and the bedroom-play-space, the family rocket had a third compartment, in the rear. Back there were the galley, bathroom facilities, and the repair equipment, with a tiny metals workshop. Only this last section held any mysteries for Deborah. She knew how to find and prepare the stored food supplies for herself and the baby; how to keep the water-reuser and air-fresher operating; where the oxy tanks were, and how to use them if she needed them.

She knew, too, how to let the bunks out of the wall in the play space, and how to fasten Petey in so he wouldn't smother or strangle himself, or fall out, or even get uncovered in the night. And she knew where all the clean clothes were kept, and how to change the baby's diapers.

These things she knew as naturally and inevitably as a child back on Earth would have known how to select a meal on the push-panel, how to use the slide-walks, how to dial his lessons.

For five days, she played house with the baby in the rocket.

The first day it was fun; she made up bottles from the roll of plastic containers, and mixed milk in the blender from the dried supply. She ate her favourite foods, wore all her best clothes, dressed the baby and undressed him,

and took him out for sun and air in the clearing blasted by the rocket jets. She discovered the uses of the spongy soil, and built fabulous mud castles while Petey played. Inside, when he was sleeping, she read films, and coloured pictures, and left the T.Z. running all the time.

The second day, and the third, she did all the same things, but it wasn't so much fun. Petey was always crying for something just when she got interested in what she was doing. And you couldn't say, "Soon as I finish this chapter," because he wouldn't understand.

Deborah got bored; then she began to get worried, too.

At first she had known that help would come; the people who lived on this planet would come looking for them. They'd rescue her and Petey; she'd be a heroine, and perhaps they'd never even ask if she knew how to open that door.

The third day, she began to think that perhaps there weren't any people on the planet at all—at least not on this part of it. There always had been a few people at least, whenever they went any place. The Government didn't send out survey engineers or geologists, like John and Sarah Levin, until after the first wildcat claims began to come in from a new territory. But this time maybe nobody knew they were coming. Or perhaps nobody had seen the crash. Or maybe this wasn't even the right planet.

She worried about that for a while, and then she remembered that her father always sent back a message-rocket when they arrived anyplace. He'd told her it was so the people on the last planet would know they were safe; if it didn't come at the right time, somebody would come out looking, to see what had happened to them.

Dee wondered how long it would take for the folks back on Starhope to get worried and come and rescue them. She couldn't even figure out how long they'd been in space on the way here. It was a long trip, but she wasn't sure if it had been a week, or a month, or more. Trips in space were always long.

The fourth day, she got tired of just waiting, and decided to explore.

She wasn't bothering with the masks any more. The dials still said *full* after the first three times they went out, and that meant air had enough oxygen in it so that the masks weren't working. So *that* was no problem.

And she could take along plenty of food. The only thing she wasn't sure about was Petey. She was afraid to leave him by himself, even in the play space, and he was too heavy to carry for very long. She took his stroller out and tried it, but the ground was too soft to push it when he was inside.

The next morning, early, Deborah packed a giant lunch, and took the stroller out again. She found out that, though it wouldn't push, it could be *pulled*, so she tied a rope to the front, and loaded it up with bottles and diapers and her lunch and Petey. Then she set off up the broad black avenue of the rocket jets; that way she could always see the ship, and they wouldn't get lost.

#### IV

Daydanda was tired. Truthfully, all this walking back and forth between chambers was a strain. Now she submitted gratefully to Kackot's fussing anxiety as he plumped the top mat here and pulled it there, adjusting the big new dais-couch to conform to her swollen body.

"I told you it was too much," he fumed. "I don't see why you want to do it anyhow. Now you rest for a while. You . . ."

"I have work to do," she reminded him.

"It can wait; let them think for themselves for once!"

She giggled mentally at the notion. Kackot refused to share her amusement.

"There's nothing that can't wait half an hour anyhow." He was almost firm with her; she loved to have him act that way sometimes. Contentedly, she stretched out and let her weight sink into the soft layers of cellulose mat. Her body rested, but her mind and eye were as active as ever. She studied the new shelves and drawers and files, the big new desk at the head of the bed. Everything was at hand; everything in place; it was wonderful. The old

room had been unbearably cluttered. Now she had only the active records near her. Everything connected with the departed was in the old room: easy to get at on the rare occasions when she needed it; but not underhand every time she turned around.

Daydanda examined the perfect arch her sons had built, and exulted in the sight of it. When she wanted anything on the other side, all she had to do was *walk right through*.

She was aware of Kackot's distress. Poor thing, he did hate to have her do anything unconventional. But no one had to know, no one who wasn't really *close* to them . . .

"Lady! Mother Daydanda!"

Kackot's image blanked out. This was a closed beam, an urgent call from an elder daughter, serving her turn in training as relay-receptionist for messages from the many less articulate children of the Household.

"What's wrong?"

"Mother! The Stranger Lady has left her wings at last! She came out from *inside* them! And with a babe in arms! She . . . oh, Mother, I do not know how to tell it; I have never known the like. She is *not* of our people. The wings are not proper wings. She has no consort. A Family of *one*! I do not understand . . ."

"Be comforted, child. There is no need for *you* to understand." With her own mind seething, Daydanda could still send a message of ease and understanding to her daughter. "You have done well. She is *not* of our people, and we must expect many strange things. Now I want the scout."

The daughter's mind promptly cleared away; in its place, Daydanda felt the nervous tingling excitement of the winged son who had been sent out to report on the fire in the east, and then to keep watch over the Strange Wings he had found there.

"Mother! I am frightened!"

The message was weak; the daughter through whom it came would be struggling with her curiosity. She was of the eighth family, almost mature, soon to depart from the Household and already showing signs of individual-

ism and rebelliousness. She would be a good Mother, Daydanda thought with satisfaction, even as she closed the contact with the scout and shut the daughter out with a sharp reprimand for inefficiency.

"There is nothing to fear," she told her son sharply: "tell me what you have seen."

"The Strange Lady has left her Wings. She has not enough limbs, and she uses a Strange litter to carry her babe. She . . ."

"She is a Stranger, son! And you have already quite adequately described her appearance. If you fear Strange-ness for its own sake, you will never pierce the tree-tops, nor win yourself a Wife. You will remain in the Household till your wings drop off, and you are put to tending the corral . . ."

As she had expected, the familiar threat reassured him as nothing else would have done. She listened closely to his detailed report of how the Stranger had left her Wings, and set off down the blackened fire-strip, pulling behind her a litter containing the Strange babe and some Strange, entirely unidentifiable, goods.

"She has not seen you?" the Mother asked at last.

"No."

"Good; you have done well. Keep her in sight, and do not fear. I shall assign an elder brother to remain near the Wings, and to join you when the Stranger chooses her new site. Do not fear; your Mother watches over all." But when the contact was broken, she turned at once in perturbation to her consort: "Kackot, do you suppose . . . please, now, try to use a *little* imagination . . . do you suppose . . . ?" She caught his apprehensive agreement, even before the thought was fully articulated; clearly that was the case: "The little one is no babe, but her consort!"

That put a different complexion on the whole matter. The flames of landing clearly could not be considered an act of deliberate hostility, if the Strange Lady's consort were so small and weak that he could not walk for himself, let alone assist in the clearing of a House-site. The

fire thus assumed a ritual-functional aspect that made good sense.

If the explanation were correct, there need be no further fear of fire. And since the Strangers' march now was in a direction that would carry them toward the outer boundary of Daydanda's Houseland—or perhaps over it, into neighbouring territory—there was no need either for immediate conflict of any kind.

Daydanda wondered that she did not feel pleased. As long as one assumed the smaller creature to be a babe, it would have meant that a fully-developed Mother was capable of leaving her home, and walking abroad . . .

Kackot, pacing restlessly across the big room, sputtered with derision. "A Mother," he reminded her irritably, "of a *very* Strange race!"

"Yes," Daydanda agreed. In any case, they had been wrong in assuming the smaller one to be a babe, simply because of size. Still, as she lay back to rest and think, the Lady was bemused by a pervading and inexplicable sense of disappointment.

## V

It was very hot. After half an hour of sweat and glare, Deborah compromised with her first plan of staying out in the open, and began following a path just inside the forest edge. She kept one tree at a time—and only one—between herself and the "road." That way she had shade and orientation both.

Lunch time seemed to come quickly, judging from her own hunger. She stepped out from under the trees, and tried to look up at the sun to see how high it was. It was too bright; she couldn't look at it right. Then she realized she was fooling herself. You didn't need a clock if you had Petey. He would be wanting his bottle before it was time for her to eat. She trudged on, dragging the ever-heavier stroller behind her. Petey just sat there, quiet and content, gurgling his approval of the expedition, and refusing to show any interest in food at all.

Dee might have been less concerned with her insides if the exterior were any less monotonous. It didn't seem

to matter where she was, or how far she walked: the forest went on endlessly, with no change in appearance except the random situation of the great trees.

After a while, she stepped out again and sighted back to the rocket; then off the other way. The end of the blasted road was in sight, now; but as far as Dee could see, there was nothing beyond it but more trees—exactly the same as the ones that stretched to left and right: tall straight dirty-yellow trunks, and a thin dense layer of grey-blue fronds high up on top.

At last Petey cried.

Dee was delighted. She tilted him back in his seat, and adjusted the plastic bottle in the holder, then fell ravenously on her own lunch.

When she was finished, she looked around again, more hopefully; at least they'd come this far in safety. Tomorrow, maybe she'd try another direction, through the woods, away from the road. While Petey napped, she raised a magnificent edifice of orange towers and turrets in the soft dirt; when he woke, she pulled him home again, content.

Maybe nobody lived here at all; maybe the planet had no aborigines. Then there was nothing to be afraid of, and she could wait safely with Petey till somebody came to rescue them. She was thinking that way right up to the time she stepped around the tail-jets of the rocket, and saw tracks.

There were two parallel sets of neat V-prints, perhaps two feet apart; they came from behind a tree near the ship, went almost to the open lock, and curved away to disappear behind another tree.

Two not-quite-parallel sets of tracks; nothing else.

Dee had courage. She looked to see what was behind the tree before she ran. But there was nothing.

That night was bad. Dee couldn't fall asleep, even in the foam bunk, even after the long walk and exercise. She twisted and turned, got up again and walked around and almost woke Petey, and got back in bed and tried to read. But when she got tired enough to sleep, and turned the light out, she'd be wide awake again, staring

at the shadows, and she'd have to turn the light on and read some more.

After a while she just lay in her bunk, with the night light on, staring at the closed safety door to the control room, where her mother and father were. Then she cried; she buried her face in the pillow and cried wetly, fluently, hopelessly, until she fell asleep, still sobbing.

She dreamed, a nightmare dream with flaming V-shaped feet and a smell of burning flesh; and woke up screaming, and woke Petey too. Then she had to stay up to change and comfort him; by the time she got him back to sleep again, she was so tired and annoyed that she'd forgotten to be scared.

Next morning, she opened the lock cautiously, expecting to see . . . almost anything. But there were only giant trees and muddy orange ground: no mysterious tracks, no strange and horrifying beasts. And no glad crew of rescuers.

Maybe the V-tracks had never existed, except in that nightmare. She spent most of the morning trying to decide about that, then looked out again, and noticed one more thing. Her own footsteps were also gone; the moist ground had filled in overnight to erase all tracks. There was no way to know for sure whether she had dreamed those tracks or seen them.

The next two days, Dee stayed in the rocket. She was keeping track of the days now. She'd looked at the chrono right after they crashed, so she knew it was seven Starhope days since they came to the planet. She knew, too, that the days here were different, shorter, because the clock was getting ahead. The seventh day on the chrono was the eighth Sunday here; and at high noon the dial said only nine o'clock. She could still tell noon by Petey's hunger, and she wondered about that: his hunger-clock seemed to have set itself by the new sun already. Certainly, he still got sleepy every night at dusk, though the clock told three hours earlier each time.

Deborah spent most of one day working out the difference. She couldn't figure out any kind of arithmetic she'd been taught to do it with, so she ended up by mak-

ing little marks for every hour and counting them. By evening, she was sure she had it right. The day here was seventeen hours instead of twenty. And then she realized she didn't know how to set days on the chrono any how ; all that work was useless.

The next morning she went out again. Two days of confinement had made Petey cranky and Dee brave.

Nothing happened ; after that, they went out daily for airings, as they had done at first. Dee made a calendar, and marked the days on that ; then she started checking the food supplies.

They had enough of almost everything, too much to figure out how long it would last. But she spent one afternoon counting the plastic bottles on Petey's roll, and figured out that they'd be gone in just three weeks, if he kept on using four a day.

Someone would come for them before that ; she was sure of it. Just the same, she decided that baby was old enough to learn to drink from a glass, and started teaching him.

Eight days became nine and ten, eleven and twelve ; still nothing happened. There was no sign of danger nor of help. Dee was sure now that she had dreamed those tracks, but somewhere on this planet she knew there were people. There *always* were ; always had been, whenever they came to someplace new. And if the people didn't come to her, she'd have to find them. Deborah began to plan her second exploratory expedition.

There was no sense in covering the same ground again. She wanted to go the other way, into the woods. That meant she'd need to blaze a trail as she went ; and it meant she couldn't use the stroller.

She added up the facts with careful logic, and realized that Petey would simply have to stay behind.

## VI

The baby crawled well now, and he could hold things ; he could pick up a piece of cracker and get it to his mouth. He couldn't hold the bottle for himself, of

course, but . . .

She tried it, closing her ears to the screams that issued steadily for an hour before he found his milk. But he did find it; her system worked. If she hung the bottle in the holder while his belly was still full, he ignored it; but when he was really hungry, he found it, and wriggled underneath to get at the down-tilted nipple. That gave her, really, a whole day to make her trip.

The night before, she packed her lunch, and for the first time, studied the contents of her father's workshop. There was a small blowtorch she had seen him use; and even in her present restless state Deborah was not so excessively brave that the thought of a weapon, as well as tree-marker, didn't tempt her. But when she found the torch, she was afraid to try it out indoors, and had to wait till morning.

At breakfast time, she stuffed Petey with food till he would eat no more. Then she clasped a bottle in the holder she'd rigged up, set the baby underneath to give him the idea once again, and went outside to try her skill with the torch. She came back, satisfied, to finish her preparations. When she left, a second bottle hung full and tempting in the play space; Petey's toys were spread around the floor; and a pile of the crackers in the corner would keep him happy, she decided, if all else failed. There was no way to solve the diaper-changing problem; he'd just have to wait for her return.

At first she tried to go in a straight line, marking every second tree along the way. After just a little while, she realized that it didn't matter which direction she took; she didn't know where she was going, anyway.

She walked on steadily, a very small girl under the distant canopy spread by the tall trees; very small, and insignificant, but erect and self-transporting on two over-allled legs; a small girl with a large hump on her back.

The hump disappeared at noon, or somewhat earlier. She stuffed the remaining sandwich and a few pieces of dried fruit into her pockets, and tied the emptied make-shift knapsack more comfortably around her waist where it flopped rhythmically against her backside as every step.

Never did she forget to mark the trees, every second one along the way.

Nowhere did she see anything but more trees ahead, and bare ground underfoot.

She had no way of knowing how far she'd gone, or even what the hour was, when the silence ceased. Ever since she'd landed, the only noise she'd heard had been her own and Petey's. It was startling; it seemed impossible by now, to hear anything else.

She stopped, with one foot set ahead of the other in midstep, and listened to the regular loud ticking of a giant clock.

It was impossible. She brought her feet into alignment and listened some more, while her heart thumped sympathetically in time to the forest's sound.

It was certainly impossible, but it came from the right, and it called to her; it promised warmth and haven. It was just an enormous alarm-clock, mechanically noisy, but it was somehow full of the same comfort-and-command she remembered in her mother's voice.

Deborah turned to the right and followed the call; but she didn't forget to mark the trees as she passed, every other one of them.

If it weren't for the trail-blazing, she might have missed the garden entirely. It was off to one side, not directly on her path to the ticking summons. She saw it only when she turned to play the torch on one more tree: a riot of colours and fantasy shapes in the near distance, between the upright trunks.

Not till then did the ticking frighten her: not till she found how hard it was to move crosswise, or any way except right toward it. She wanted to see it. Most likely it was just wild, but there was always a chance . . .

And when she tried to walk that way, her legs didn't want to go. Panic clutched at her, and failed to take hold. She was an intrepid explorer on an alien planet, exposed to unknown dangers. Also, she was a Space Girl.

"I pledge my honour to do everything in my power to uphold the high standards of the human race," she

intoned, not quite out loud, and immediately felt better. "A Space Girl is brave. A Space Girl is honest. A Space Girl is truthful. A Space Girl . . ."

She went clear down the list of virtues she had learned in Gamma Troop on Starhope, and while she mumbled them, her legs came under control. The ticking went on, but it was just a noise—and not as loud as it had been, either. She dodged scoutwise from behind one tree-trunk to another, approaching the garden. If, indeed, it was a garden. Two trees away, she stopped and stared.

Every planet had strange new shapes and sights and smells; the plants in each new place were always excitingly different. But Dee was old enough to know that everywhere chlorophyll was green, as blood was red. Oh, blood could seem almost black, or blue, or pale pink, or even almost white; and chlorophyll could shade to dark grey, and down to faint cream-yellow. But growing gardens had green-variant leaves or stems. And everywhere she'd been, the plants, however strange, were unified. The trees here grew blue-green-grey on top. The flowers should not grow, as they seemed to do, in every random shade of colour.

There was no way to tell the leaves from seeds from stems from buds. It was just . . . growth. A sort of arched form sprouted bright magenta filaments from its ivory mass. A bulbous something that tapered to the ground showed baby blue beneath the many-coloured moss that covered it. Between them on the ground, a series of concentric circles shaded from slate grey on the outside to oyster white in the centre, only it was so thin that a tinge of orange showed through from the soil below. Dee would not have thought it lived at all, until she noticed a slow rippling motion outward toward the edges.

Farther in, one form joined shapeless edges with another; one colour merged haphazard with the next. Deborah blinked, confused, and walked away, following the call of the great ticking clock, then mumbled to herself, "I pledge my honour to do everything . . ." She turned back to the puzzling growths again, aware now that the calling

power of the sound diminished when she said the words aloud.

The colours were too confusing. She had to concentrate, and couldn't think about the garden while she talked to herself. Maybe the Pledge wasn't the only thing that would do it. She said under her breath: "That one is purple, and the other's like a pear . . ."

It worked. All she had to do was make her thoughts into words. It didn't matter what she said, or whether she whispered or shouted. As long as she kept talking, the summoning call would turn to a giant clock again, with no power over the movements of her legs. She went up closer to the baffling coloured shapes, and made out a fairy-delicate translucent spiral thing and then a large mauve mushroom in the centre.

*Mushroom!* At last she understood. They were so big, she hadn't thought of it at first; it was all fungus growth, and that made sense in the dim damp beneath the trees.

Strange it isn't every place, all over, she thought, and realized she was moving away from the garden again, and remembered this was one time it was all *right* to *talk* to herself out loud. "There must be some people here. Some kind of people or natives. That noise is strange, too. It couldn't just *happen* that way; *somebody* lives here . . ."

She didn't want to touch the fungus, but she went up close to it. "Things *don't* just happen this way. That stuff would grow all over if it was wild; somebody planted it." She peered through the arch-shape to the inside, and jumped back violently.

The thing was lying on its side, sucking a lower follicle of the arch, its livid belly working as convulsively as its segmented mouth, its many limbs sprawled out in all directions.

Dee jumped away in horror, and crept back in fascination. "It doesn't know I'm here," she remembered to whisper. From around the other side of the bulbous growth she watched, and slowly understood.

"It's like some kind of insect." It couldn't really be an insect, of course, because it was two feet long—much

too large for an insect. An insect this size, on a planet as much like Earth as this was, wouldn't be able to breathe. They'd explained about why insects couldn't be any larger than the ones you found on Earth in Space Girl class. But men had found creatures on other planets that did look a lot like insects, and acted a lot like them, too. And even though people knew they weren't really insects, they still called such creatures "bugs" . . .

Well, this thing was as close to an insect as a thing this size could be, Deborah decided. It was two feet long, and that made sense when you stopped to think about it, what with the tall trees and the giant mushrooms. She counted six legs, and then realized that the other two in front, resting quietly now, were feelers. The two front legs clutched at a clump of hairy shoots on the arched moss, almost like Petey holding his bottle. The back leg that was on top was longer than the front ones; it was braced against the arch for steadiness. The lower leg was tucked underneath the body; its lower middle leg also lay still on the ground, stretched straight out. The upper middle leg was busily scratching at a small red spot on the belly, acting absurdly independent of the rest of the feeding creature.

There was really, Dee decided, nothing frightening except the mouth. She looked for eyes, and couldn't see them, then remembered that some bugs on other planets had them on the backs of their heads. But that mouth . . .

It worked like Petey's on a nipple; but not like Petey's, because this one had six lips, all thick and round-looking instead of like people's lips, and all closing in toward each other at the same time. It was horrible to watch.

Dee backed off silently, and found herself walking the wrong way again. She tried the multiplication table while she made a circuit of the "garden," examining it for size and shape, and looking for a clear part that would let her see into the centre.

She found, at last, a whole row of the jelly-like translucent things, lying flat and low, so she could look inside. The ground beneath them was scattered with flashing jewel-like stones . . .

*No, black stones, with the bright part in the middle,* she thought in words. *No, not the middle. At one end . . . each stone was lying partly on an edge of the jelly-stuff . . . about as big as my foot,* she thought, and saw the tiny feet around the edge of every stone.

*Eyes on the backs of their heads,* she thought, *and they have car . . . carpets? . . . carapaces!* These bugs were smaller than the first one, and not frightening at all. Bugs only looked bad from the bottom, she realized, and instantly corrected that impression.

Something walked into the garden, and picked up four of the little ones. Something as tall as Dee herself when it went in, and half again as high when it left. It entered on four legs, and walking upside-down, head carried toward the ground, and looking backward . . . no, *facing* backward, *looking* forward. It entered calmly, moving at a steady even pace; approached the edge of the garden where Deborah watched the infants feeding . . . and froze.

An instant's immobility, then the big bug erupted into a frenzy of activity: scooped up the four closest little ones—two of them with the long hairy jointed arms (or legs? back legs?), and two more hurriedly with two front legs (or arms?)—and almost *ran* out, now on just two legs, the centre ones, its body neatly balanced fore and aft, almost perfectly horizontal, the heavy hooded head in front, the spiny rounded abdomen in back.

It scuttled off with its four tiny wriggling bundles, and as it left, Dee registered in full the terror of what she had seen.

She fled . . . and by some miracle, fled past a tree she'd marked, so paused in flight to find the next one, and the next, and followed her blazed trail safely back. The ticking of the forest followed for a while, then stopped abruptly. But while it lasted, it *pushed* away as hard as it had pulled before.

## VII

Daydanda made the last entry in her calendar of the day, and filed it with yesterday's and all the others. Things were going well. The youngest Family was thriv-

ing; the next-to-youngest—the Eleventh—was almost ready to start schooling; ready, in any case, for weaning from the Garden. Soon there would be room in the nurseries for a new brood.

Kackot was restless. She hadn't meant the thought for him at all, but he was sensitive to such things now, and he moved slightly, eagerly, toward her from his place across the room—perhaps honestly mistaking his own desire for the summons.

She sent a thought of love and promise, and temporary firm refusal. The new Family would have to wait. Within the Household, things were going well; but there were other matters to consider.

There was the still-unsolved puzzle of the Strangers, for instance. For a few hours, that mystery had seemed quite satisfactorily solved. When the Strange Lady left her Wings with baby-or-consort—now it seemed less certain which it was—to travel the path the flames had cleared for her, the whole thing had assumed a ritual aspect that made it easier to understand. Whatever Strange reasons, motives, or traditions were involved, it all seemed to fit into a pattern of some kind . . . until the next report informed Daydanda that the two Strangers had returned to their Wings—an act no less, and no more, unprecedented than their manner of arrival, or their strange appearance.

They had not since departed from the—

*The House?* she wondered suddenly. Could a House be somehow made to travel through the air?

She felt Kackot's impatient irritation with such fantasizing, and had to agree. Surely the image of—*it*—relayed by the flier-scout who had approached most closely, resembled in no way any structure Daydanda had ever seen or heard of.

But neither was it similar in any way, she thought—and this time guarded the thought from her consort's limited imagination—to ordinary, Wings, except by virtue of the certain knowledge that it had descended from the sky above the trees.

Today there had been no report. The fliers were all

busy on the northern boundary, where a more ordinary sort of nesting had been observed. When the trouble there was cleared up, she could afford to keep a closer watch on the apparently not-hostile Strangers.

Meantime, certainly, it was best to let a new Family wait. Laying was hard on her; always had been. And with possible action developing on two fronts now . . .

Kackot stirred again, but not with any real hope, and the Lady barely bothered to reply. It was time to bring the young ones in. Daydanda began the evening Homecalling, the message to return, loud and strong and clear for all to hear: a warning to unfriendly neighbours; a promise and renewal to all her children in the Household, young and old.

"Lady! oh, Mother!" Daydanda sustained the Homecalling at full strength, through a brief surge of stubborn irritation; then, suddenly worried—the daughter on relay knew enough not to interrupt at this time for anything less than urgent—she allowed enough of her concentration to be distracted so as to permit a clear reception.

"Lady! . . . nurse from east garden . . . very frightened, confused . . . message unclear . . . she wishes."

"Send her in!" Daydanda cut off the semi-hysterical outburst, and terminated the Homecalling abruptly, with extra emphasis on the last few measures.

The nurse dashed through the archway, too distraught to make a ritual approach, almost forgetting to prostrate herself in the presence of the Lady, her Mother. She opened communication while still in motion, as soon as she was within range of her limited powers. Daydanda recognized her with the first contact: a daughter of the fifth family—not very bright, even for a wingless one, but not given to emotional disturbance either, and a fine nurse, recently put in charge of the east garden.

"The Stranger, Mother Daydanda! The Strange Lady! . . . she came to the *nursery* . . . she would have stolen . . . killed . . . she would have . . ."

*To the nursery!*

The Mother had to quell an instant's panic of her own before she could commence the careful questioning and

reiterated reassurance that were needed to obtain a coherent picture from the nurse. When at last she had stripped away the fearful imaginative projections that stemmed from the daughter's well-conditioned protectiveness, it appeared that the Strange Lady had visited the Garden, had spied on the feeding babys, and then had departed with haste when the Nurse came to fetch them home for the night.

"The babys are all safe?" the Mother asked sternly.

"Yes, Lady. I brought them to the House quick as I could, before I came to you. I would not have presumed to come, my Lady, but I could not make the winged one understand. Will my Mother forgive . . ."

"There is nothing to forgive; you have done well," Daydanda dismissed her. "You were right to come to me, even during the Homecalling."

Breathing easy again, and once more in full possession of her faculties, the nurse offered thanks and farewell, and wriggled backwards out of sight under the arch, quite properly apologetic. The Lady barely noticed; she was already in contact with the flier-scout who had been reassigned from the North border by the daughter on relay, as soon as the nurse's first wild message was connected with the Strange Wings.

It was a son of the eighth Family, the same scout who had approached the Wings before, a well-trained, conscientious, and devoted son, almost ready to undertake the duties of a consortship. Daydanda could not have wished for a better representative through whose sense to perceive the Strangers.

Yet, there was little she could learn through him. The Strange Lady had returned to the Wings . . . *the House*? More and more it seemed so . . . where the small Stranger presumably awaited her. Now they were both inside, and the remarkable barrier that could be raised or lowered in a matter of seconds was blocking the entranceway.

Perception of any kind was difficult through the dense stuff of which the . . . whatever-it-was: Wings? House? . . . was made. The scout was useless now. Daydanda

instructed him to stay on watch, and abandoned the contact. Then she concentrated her whole mind in an effort to catch some impression—anything at all—from beyond the thick fabric of . . . whatever-it-was.

Eventually, there was a flash of something; then another. Not much, but the Lady waited patiently, and used each fleeting image to build a pattern she could grasp. One thought, and another thought, and . . .

To Kackot's astonishment, the Lady relaxed suddenly with an outpouring of amusement. She did not communicate to him what she knew, but abruptly confirmed all his worst fears of the past weeks with a single command: "I will go to the Strange Wings, oh Consort. Prepare a litter for me."

When she addressed him thus formally, he had no recourse but to obey. If she noticed his sputtering dismay at all, she gave no sign, but lay back on her couch, thoroughly fatigued, to rest through the night while her sons and daughters prepared a litter, and enlarged the outer arches sufficiently to accommodate its great size.

### VIII

Dee was scared, and she didn't know what to do. She wanted her mother; it was no fun taking care of Petey now. She made him a bottle to keep him from screaming, but she didn't bother with his diaper or fixing up his bunk or anything like that. It didn't matter any more.

There were no people on this planet.

Nobody was going to rescue them; nobody at all.

It wasn't the right planet, at all. If anybody on Star-hope got worried and went to look for them, it was some other planet they'd look on. It had to be, because there were no people here. Just *bugs*!

Petey fell asleep with the bottle still in his mouth, sprawled on the floor, all wet and dirty. Deborah didn't care; she sat on the floor herself and fell asleep and didn't even know she slept till she woke up, with nothing changed, except that the clock said it was morning.

And she was hungry after all.

She started back to the galley, but first she had to open the outer lock. She actually had her hand on the lever before she realized she didn't *want* to open it. She was hungry; the last thing in the world she wanted to do was look outside again. She went back and got a piece of cake and some milk.

Milk for Petey, too. If she got it fixed before he woke up, she wouldn't have to listen to him yelling his head off again. She started to fix a bottle, but first she had to open the lock.

This time, she stopped herself halfway there.

It was silly to think she had to look out; she didn't want to.

Petey was awake, but he wasn't hollering for once. She went back and got the bottle, and brought it into the play space.

"Open it," Petey said. "Come out, Mother."

"All right," Dee told him. She gave him the bottle, went over to the lock, and then turned around and looked at him, terrified.

He was sucking on the bottle. "Come on," he said. "Mother waiting."

She was watching him while he said it. He didn't say it; he drank his milk.

She didn't think she was crazy, so she was still asleep, and this was a dream. It wasn't really happening at all, and it didn't matter.

She opened the lock.

## IX

*Once she had flown above the tree-tops, silver strong wings beating a rhythm of pride and joy in the high dry air above the canopy of fronds. Her eyes had gleamed under the white rays of the sun itself, and she had looked, with wild unspeakable elation, into the endless glaring brilliance of the heavens.*

Now she was tired, and the blessed relief from sensation when they set her down on the soft ground—after the

lurching motion of the forest march—was enough to make her momentarily regret her decision. A foolish notion this whole trip . . .

Kackot agreed enthusiastically.

The Lady closed her thoughts from his, and commanded the curtain at her side to be lifted. Supine in her litter, safely removed from the Strangers under a tree at the fringe of the clearing, her vast body embedded on layers of cellulose mat, Daydanda looked out across the ravaged black strip. And the sun, in all its strength, collected on the shining outer skin of the Strange Wings, gathered its light into a thousand fiery needles to sear the surface of her eyes, and pierce her very soul with agony.

*Once she had flown above the trees themselves . . .*

Now her sons and daughters rushed to her side, in response to her uncontained anguish. They pulled close the curtain, and formed a tight protective wall of flesh and carapace around the litter. And from the distance, came a clamouring bloodlust eagerness: the Bigheads waking in answer to her silent shriek of pained surprise. She sent them prompt soothing, and firm command to be still; not till she was certain they understood, and would obey, did she dare turn any part of her mind to a consideration of her own difficulties. Even then she was troubled with the knowledge that her stern suppression of their rage to fight would leave the entire Bighead brood confused, and useless for the next emergency. It might be many days before their dull minds could be trained again to the fine edge of danger-awareness they had just displayed. If any trouble should arise in the meanwhile . . .

She sent instructions to an elder daughter in the House to start the tedious process of reconditioning at once, then felt herself free at last to devote all her attention to the scene at hand. Tomorrow's troubles would have to take care of themselves till tomorrow. For now, there was disturbance, anxiety, and mortification enough.

That she, who had flown above the trees, higher and further than any sibling of her brood that *she* should suffer from the sunlight now . . .

"It was many years and many Families ago, my dear, my Lady."

Daydanda felt her consort's comforting concern and thought a smile. "Many years indeed . . ." And it was true; she had not been outside her chamber till this day—since the first Family they raised was old enough to tend the fungus gardens, and to carry the new babes back and forth. That was many years behind her now, and she had grown through many chambers since that time: each larger than the last, and now, most recently, the daring double chamber with the great arch to walk through.

The Household had prospered in those years, and the boundaries of its land were wide. The gardens grew in many places now, and the thirteenth Family would soon outgrow the nursery. The winged sons and daughters of Seven Families had already grown to full maturity, and departed to establish new Houses of their own . . . or to die in failure. And through the years, the numbers of the wingless ones who never left the Household grew great; masons and builders, growers and weavers, nurses and teachers—there were always more of them, working for the greater welfare of the House, and their Mother, its Lady.

Through all those building, growing, widening years, Daydanda had *forgotten* . . . forgotten the graceful wings and the soaring flight; the dazzling sunlight, and the fresh moist air just where the fronds stirred high above her now; the bright colours and half-remembered shapes of trees and nursery plants. Not once, in all that time, had she savoured the full sensory sharpness of *outside* . . .

She thought longingly of the nursery garden, the first one, that she and Kackot had planted together when they waited for the first Family to come. She thought of it, determined to see it again one day, then put aside all thoughts, hopes, and regrets of past or future.

Daydanda directed that her litter be moved so that the opening of the curtain would give her a view of the forest interior. Then, while her eyes grew once again

accustomed to their former functioning, she began to seek—with a more practised organ of perception—the mind-patterns of the Strangers inside that frighteningly bright structure in the clearing.

It was hard work. Whether there was something in the nature of the dense fabric of the Wings, or whether the difficulty lay only in the Strangeness of the beings inside, she could not tell, but at the beginning, the Lady found that proximity made small difference in her ability to perceive what was inside.

*Strangers!* One could hardly expect them, after all, to provide familiar friend-or-enemy patterns for perception. Yet that very knowledge made the brief flashes of contact that she got all the more confusing, for they contained a teasing familiarity that made the Strange elements even less comprehensible by contrast.

For just the instant's duration of a swift brush of minds, the Mother felt as though it were a daughter of her own inside the Strange structure; then the feeling was lost, and she had to strain every effort again simply to locate the image.

A series of slow moves, meantime, brought her litter gradually back round to where it had been at first; and though she found it was still painful to look for any length of time directly at the blazing light reflected from the Wings, the Lady discovered that by focusing on the trees diagonally across the clearing, she could include the too-bright object within her peripheral vision.

That much assured, she ceased to focus visually at all. Time enough for that when—if—the Strangers should come forth. Once more she managed to grasp, briefly, the mental image of the Strangers, or of one of them; and once again she felt the unexpected response within herself, as if she were in contact with a daughter of the Household . . .

She lost it then; but it fitted with her sudden surmise of the night before.

Now, in the hopeful certainty that she had guessed correctly, she abandoned the effort at perception entirely; she gathered all her energies instead into one tight-beamed communication aimed at penetrating the thick skin of the

Wings, and very little different in any way from the standard evening Homecalling.

It took some time. She was beginning to think she had failed: that the Strangers were not receptive to her call, or would respond only with fear and hostility. Then, without warning, the barrier at the entranceway was gone.

No . . . not actually *gone*. It was still there, and still somehow attached to the main body of the Wings, but turned around so it no longer barred the way. And the opening this uncovered turned out to be, truly, the double-arch she had seen—but not quite credited—through her son's eyes.

Two arches, resting on each other base-to-base, but open in the centre: the shape of a hollowed-eye. Such a shape might grow, but it could not be *built*. Half-convinced as she had been that the Wings or House, or whatever-it-was, was an artificial structure rather than a natural form, Daydanda had put the relayed image of the doorway down to distortion of communication the night before. Now she saw it for herself: that, and the device that moving like a living thing to barricade the entrance.

*Like a living thing . . .*

It could fly; it was therefore, by all precedent of knowledge, alive. Reluctantly, the Lady discarded the notion that the Wings had been built by Strange knowledge. But even then, she thought soberly, there was much to be learned from the Strangers.

And in the next moment, she ceased to think at all. The Stranger emerged—the bigger of the two Strangers—and at the first impact of full visual *and* mental perception, Daydanda's impossible theory was confirmed.

## X

Deborah stood outside, on the charred ground in front of the rocket, earnestly repeating the multiplication table: "Two two's are four. Three two's are six. Four two's . . ."

She was just as big as any of these bugs. The only one

that was bigger was the one inside the box that she could only see part of—but that one had something wrong with it. It just lay there stretched out flat all the time, as if it couldn't get up. The box had handles for carrying, too, so Dee didn't have to worry about how big that one was.

All the rest of them were just about her own size, or even smaller but there were too *many* of them. And when she thought about actually touching one, with its hairy, sticky legs, she remembered the sick crackling sound a beetle makes when you step on it.

She didn't want to fight them, or anything like that; and she didn't think they wanted to hurt her specially, either. She didn't have the knotted-up, tight kind of feeling you get when somebody wants to hurt you. They didn't *feel* like enemies, or act that way, either. They were just too . . .

"Four four's are sixteen. Five four's are twenty. Six four's are twenty-four. Seven . . ."

. . . too *interested*! And that was a silly thing to think, because how could *she* tell if they were interested? She couldn't even see their faces, because all the ones in front were bending backwards-upside-down, like the one she'd seen in the garden . . .

". . . four's are twenty-eight. Eight four's are thirty-two. Nine four's are . . ."

. . . just standing there, the whole row of them, with their back legs or arms or whatever-they-were sticking up in the air, and their heads dipped down in front so they could stare at her out of the big glittery eye in the middle of each black head . . .

". . . thirty-six. Ten four's are forty. Eleven . . ."

What did they want, anyhow? Why didn't they *do* something?

". . . four's are forty-four. Twelve four's . . ."

The Space Girl oath was hard to remember if you were trying to think about other things at the same time; but Deborah knew the multiplication tables by heart, and she could keep talking while she was thinking.

Daydanda was fascinated. She had guessed at it, in

her chamber the night before . . . more than guessed, really. She would have been *certain*, if the notion were not so flatly impossible in terms of all knowledge and experience. It was precisely that conflict between perception and precedent that had determined her to make the trip out here.

And she was right! These two were neither Lady and consort, nor Mother and baby, but only two children: a half-grown daughter and a babe in arms. Two young wingless ones, alone, afraid, and . . . *Motherless*?

Eagerly, Daydanda poured out her questionings:

Where did they come from?

What sort of beings were they?

Where was their Mother?

"Twelve four's are forty-eight. One five is five. Two five's are ten. Three . . ."

The important thing was just to keep talking—Dee knew that from when she had so much trouble at the garden. As long as she was saying *something*, anything at all, she could keep the crazy stuff out of her head.

". . . five's are fifteen. Four five's are twenty. Five five's . . ."

It was harder this time, though. At the garden, with the drumbeat-heartbeat sound that felt like Mommy's voice, all she had to do was *think* words. But now, it was stuff like thinking Petey was saying things to her—or feeling like somebody else was asking her a lot of silly questions. And every time she stopped for breath at all, she'd start wanting to answer a lot of things inside her head that there wasn't even anybody around to have asked.

". . . are twenty-five. Six five's are thirty."

The aching soreness in her body from the jolting journey through the forest . . . the instant's agony when the sunlight seared her eye . . . the nagging worry over the disturbed Big-heads . . . all these were forgotten, or submerged, as the Lady experienced, for the first time in her life, the frustration of her curiosity.

Every answer she could get from the Strange child came

in opposites. Each question brought a pair of contradictory replies . . . if it brought any reply at all. Half the time, at least, the Stranger was refusing reception entirely, and for some obscure reason, broadcasting great quantities of arithmetic—most of it quite accurate, but all of it irrelevant to the present situation.

Would they remain here? the Lady asked. Or would they return to their own House? Had they come to build a House here? Or was the Wing-like structure on the blackened ground truly a House instead?

The answers were many and also various.

They would not stay, the Stranger seemed to say, nor would they leave. The structure from which she had emerged was a House, but it was also Wings: Unfamiliar concept in a single symbol—Wings-House? *Both!*

Their Mother was nearby—inside—but—dead? *No!* Not *dead!*

How could the child possibly answer a sensible question sensibly if she started broadcasting sets of numbers every time anyone tried to communicate with her? *Very rude*, Daydanda thought, and *very stupid*. Kackot eagerly confirmed her opinion, and moved a step closer to the litter, as if preparing to commence the long march home.

The Lady had no time to reprimand him. At just that moment, the Strange child also broke into motion—perhaps also feeling that the interview was over.

“. . . Thirty. Seven five’s are thirty-fi . . .”

*One of them moved!*

Just a couple of steps, but Dee, panicked, forgot to keep talking and started a dash for the rocket; her head was full of questions again, and part of her mind was trying to answer them, without *her* wanting to at all, while another part decided *not* to go back inside, with a mixed-up kind of feeling, as if Petey didn’t want her to.

And *that* was silly, because she could hear Petey crying now. He wanted her to come in, all right, or at least to come and get him. She couldn’t tell for sure, the way he was yelling, whether he was scared and mad at being left alone—or just mad and wanting to get picked up. It sounded almost more like he thought he was being left out or something, and wanted to get in on the fun.

*If he thinks this is fun . . . !*

"We're lost, that's what we are," she said out loud, as if she were answering real questions someone had asked, instead of crazy ones inside her own head. "I don't know where we are. We came from Starhope. That's a different planet. A different *world*. I don't know where . . . One five is five," she remembered. "Two sixes are seven. I mean two seven's are twenty-one . . . I can't think *anything* right!"

It *really* didn't matter what she said; as long as she kept talking. If she answered the silly questions right out loud that was all right too, because they couldn't understand her anyhow. How would *they* know Earthish?

It was possible that the Stranger's sudden move to return to the Wings-House was simply a response to Kackot's gesture of readiness to depart. The Lady promised herself an opportunity to express her irritation with her consort—soon. For the moment, however, every bit of energy she could muster went into a plea-command-call-invitation to the Strange child to remain outside the shelter and continue to communicate.

The Stranger hesitated, paused—but even before that, she had begun, perversely, now that no questions were being asked, to release a whole new flood of semi-information.

*More contradictions, of course!*

These two, the Stranger children, were—something hard to comprehend—not-aware-of-where-they-were.

They were in need of help, but not helpless.

The elder of the two—the daughter who now stood wavering in her intentions, just beside the open barrier of the Wings-House—was obviously acting in the capacity of nurse. Yet her self-pattern of identity claimed reproductive status!

Certainly, the girl's attitude toward her young sibling was an odd mixture of what one might expect to find in nurse or Mother. Possibly the relationship could be made clearer by contact with the babe himself. There was little enough in the way of general information to be

expected from such a source, but here he might be helpful. Tentatively, with just a small part of her mind, Daydanda reached out to find the babe, still concentrating on her effort to keep the older one from departing . . .

"Food . . . mama . . . suck . . . oh, look!"

The Lady promptly turned her full attention to the babe.

After the obstructionist tactics, and confused content of the Strange girl's mind, the little one's response to a brushing contact was doubly startling. Now that she was fully receptive to them, thoughts came crowding into the Mother's mind, thoughts unformed and infantile, but buoyantly eager and hopeful.

"Love . . . food . . . good . . . mama . . . suck . . . see . . . see . . ."

"Three seven's are twenty one!" Dee remembered triumphantly, and began feeling a lot better. They were all standing still again, for one thing; and her head felt clearer, too.

She moved a cautious step backward, watching them as she went, and not having any trouble now remembering her multiplication.

"Four seven's are twenty-eight . . ."

Just a few more steps. If she could just get back inside, and get the door closed, she wouldn't open it again for *anything*. She'd stay right there with Petey till some *people* came . . ."

". . . MAMA . . . SUCK . . . see . . . see . . . good . . . love . . ."

It might have been one of her own latest brood, so easy and familiar was the contact. Just about the same age-level and emotional development, too. Daydanda was suddenly imperatively anxious to see the babe directly, to hold it in her own arms, to feel what sort of strange shape and texture could accommodate such warmly customary longings and perceptions.

"The babe!" she commanded. "I wish to have the babe

brought to me!" But the nurse to whom she had addressed the order hung back miserably.

"The babe, I said!" The Lady released all her pent-up irritation at the Stranger child, in one peremptory blast of anger at her own daughter. "Now!"

"Lady, I cannot . . . the light . . . forgive me, my Lady . . ."

With her own eye still burning in its socket, Daydanda hastily blessed the nursing daughter, and excused her. Even standing on the fringes of the bright-lit area must be frightening to the wingless ones. But whom else could she send? The fliers were unaccustomed to handling babes . . .

"Kackot!"

He was good with babes, really. She felt better about sending him than she would have had she trusted the handling of the Stranger to a nurse. Kackot himself felt otherwise; but at the moment, the Lady's recognition of his discomfiture was no deterrent to her purpose; she had not forgotten his ill-advised move a little earlier.

The consort could not directly disobey. He went forward, doubtfully enough, and stood at the open entrance-way, peering in.

"Oh, *look!* . . . love . . . look!"

The babe's welcoming thoughts were unmistakable; Kackot must have felt them as Daydanda did. Stranger or no, the near presence of a friendly and protective entity made it beg to be picked up, petted, fondled, loved—and hopefully, though not, the Mother thought, truly hungrily—perhaps also to be fed.

Meantime, however, there was the older child to reckon with. The babe was eager to come; the girl, Daydanda sensed, was determined not to allow it. Once more, the Mother tried to reach the Strange daughter with empathy and affection and reassurance. Once again, she met only blankness and refusal. Then she sent a surge of loving invitation to the babe, and got back snuggling eagerness and warmth—and suddenly, from the elder one, a lessening of fear and anger.

Daydanda smiled inside herself: she thought she knew now how to penetrate the strange defences of the child.

Dee stood still and watched it happen. She saw the nervous fussy-bug the one that had scared her when he moved before—go right over to the rocket and *look inside*. He passed right by her, close enough to touch; she was going to do something about it, until Petey started talking again.

He said, "Baby come to mama."

At least, she *thought* he said it. Then she *almost* thought she heard a Mother say, "It's all right; don't worry. Baby wants to come to mama."

"Mother's *dead!*!" Deborah screamed at them all, at Petey and the bugs, without ever even opening her mouth. "Five seven's are thirty-five," she said hurriedly. She'd been forgetting to keep talking, that's what the trouble was. "Six seven's are fourty-two. Seven . . ."

And still, she couldn't get the notion out of her head that it was her own mother's voice she'd heard. "Seven seven's . . ." she said desperately, and couldn't keep from turning around to look at the part of the rocket where Mommy was—would be—had been when—

The smooth gleaming metal nose looked just the same as ever, now it was cool again. There was no way of knowing anything had ever happened in there. *If anything had happened . . .*

Deborah stared and stared, as if looking long enough and hard enough would let her see right through the triple hull into the burned-out inside: the wrecked control room, and the two charred bodies that had been Father and Mother.

" . . . seven seven's is forty—forty-seven? . . . eight . . . ?"

She floundered, forgetting, she was too small, and she didn't know what to do about anything, and she wanted her mother.

"It's all right. Stand still. Don't worry. Baby wants to come to mama."

It wasn't her own mother's voice, though; that wasn't

the way Mommy talked. If it was these bugs that were making her hear crazy things and putting silly questions in her head . . . seven seven's . . . seven seven's is . . . just stand still . . . don't worry . . . everything will be all right . . . seven seven's . . . *I don't know . . . don't worry, all right, stand still, seven's is . . .*

"*Forty-nine!*" she shrieked. The fussy-bug was all the way inside, and she'd been standing there like any dumb kid, hearing thoughts and voices that weren't real, and not knowing what to do.

"Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two," she shouted. She could have been just counting like that all along, instead of trying to remember something like seven times seven. *Get out of there, you awful hairy horrible old thing!* "Fifty-three, fifty-four. You leave my brother alone!"

The fussy-bug came crawling out of the airlock, with Petey—soft little pink-and-wet Petey—clutched in its sticky arms.

"Fifty-five," she tried to shout, but it came out like a creak instead. *You leave him alone!* her whole body screamed; but her throat was too dry and felt as if somebody had glued it together, and she couldn't make any words come out at all. She started forward to grab the baby.

"Come to Mama," Petey said. "Nice Mama. Like. Good."

She was looking right at him all the time, and she knew he wasn't *really* talking. Just drooling the way he always did, and making happy-baby gurgling noises. He certainly didn't act scared—he was cuddling up to the hairy-bug just as if it was a *person*.

"Come to Mama," the baby crooned inside her head; she should have made a grab for him right then, but somehow she wasn't *sure* . . .

The fussy-bug walked straight across the clearing to the tree where the big box was, and handed Petey inside.

"Oo-oo-ooh, *Mama!*" Petey cried out with delight.

"*Mommy's dead!*" Deborah heard herself shouting, so she knew her voice was working again. "Dead, she's dead.

can't you understand that? Any dope could understand that much. She's *dead!*"

Nobody paid any attention to her. Petey was laughing out loud; and the sound got mixed up with some other kind of laughter in her head that was hard to not-listen to, because it felt *good*.

## XII

Holding the babe tenderly, Daydanda petted and patted and stroked it, and made pleased laughter from them both. Cautiously, she experimented with balancing the intensities of the two contacts, trying to gauge the older child's reactions to each variation. Reluctantly, as she observed the results, she came to the conclusion that the Strange daughter had indeed been consciously attempting to block communication.

It was unheard-of; therefore impossible—but impossibilities were commonplace today. The Mother's own presence at this scene was a flat violation of tradition and natural law.

Nevertheless:

The child had emerged from the Wings-House, in response to a Homecalling pattern.

Therefore, she was not an enemy.

Therefore she could not possibly feel either fear or hostility toward Daydanda's Household.

These things being true, what reason could she have for desiring to prevent communication?

Answer: Obviously, despite the logic of the foregoing, the Strange child was *afraid*.

Why? There was no danger to her in this contact.

"Stupid," Kackot grumbled; "just plain stupid. As much brains as a Bighead. Lady, it is getting late; we have a long journey home . . ."

Daydanda let him rumble on. A child was likely to behave stupidly when frightened. She remembered, and sharply reminded her consort, of the time a young winged one of her own, a very bright boy normally—was it the fifth Family he was in? No, the sixth—had wandered into

the Bigheads' corral, and been too petrified with fear to save himself, or even to call for help.

The boy had been afraid, she remembered now, that he would call the Bigheads' attention to himself if he tried to communicate with anyone, so he closed off against the world. Of course, he knew in advance that the Bigheads were dangerous. If the Stranger here had somehow decided to be fearful *in advance*, perhaps her effort to block contact was motivated the same way . . .

"The Homecalling," Kackot reminded her; "she answered a Homecalling."

"She is a Stranger," Daydanda pointed out. "Perhaps she responded to friendship without identifying it . . . I don't know . . ."

But she would find out. Once again she centred her attention on the babe, keeping only a loose contact with the older child.

Dee kept watching the box on the ground that had the big bug inside it. She couldn't see much of the bug, and she couldn't see Petey at all, after the other bug handed him in. But it wasn't just Petey she was watching for.

It was that big bug that was—talking to her. Well, anyhow, that was making it sound as if Petey talked to her and putting questions in her head and . . .

She didn't know how *it* did it, but she couldn't pretend any more that it wasn't really happening. Somebody was picking and poking at her inside her head, and she didn't know how they did it or why, or what to do about it. But she was sure by now that the big bug in the box was the one.

"Let's see now—seven seven's is forty-nine." Just counting didn't seem to work so well. "Seven eight's is . . . I mean, *eight seven's* is . . . I don't know I can't remember . . . We came for Daddy and Mommy to make reports. That's what they always do. Daddy's a Survey Engineer and Mommy's a Geologist. They work for the Planetary Survey Commiss . . . I mean they *did* . . ."

It was none of their business. And they did know Earthish!

If they didn't, how could *they* talk to *her*?

"Seven seven's is forty-nine. Seven seven's is forty-nine. Seven seven's . . ."

At the first exchange, the Lady had put it down to incompetence, but she could no longer entertain that excuse. The Strangers had no visible antennae, yet the ease of communication with the babe made it clear that they could receive as well as broadcast readily—if they wished.

The perception appeared to be associated with an organ Daydanda had at first mistaken for a mouth: small and flat, centred toward the bottom of the face, and enclosed by just two soft-looking mandibles.

In the babe, the mandibles were almost constantly in motion, and there was a steady flow of undirected, haphazard communication, such as was normal for the little one's apparent level of development. With the older child, it was apparent that the messages that came when the mandibles were moving were stronger, clearer, and more purposeful in meaning than the others. Unfortunately, the content of these messages was mostly nothing but arithmetic.

Yet even when the "mouth" was at rest, Daydanda noticed that there was a continuous trickle of communication from the Strange daughter—a sort of reluctant release of thought, rather like the babe's in that it was undirected and largely involuntarily, but with two striking differences: the eagerness of the babe to be heard, and the fact that the content of the older one's thoughts were not at all infantile, but sometimes startlingly mature.

Daydanda repeated her questions, this time watching the mandibles as the answers came, and realized that the thin stream of involuntary communication went on even while mandible messages were being sent—and that the "opposite" answers she'd been receiving were the result of the differences between the purposeful broadcasts and the background flow.

The Strangers' Mother and her consort, it appeared, (gradually, the Lady learned to put the two answers together so that they made sense) had come here to survey

the land (to look for a House-site, one would assume), and they had techniques as well for determining before excavation what lay far underground. However, they were now dead . . . perhaps . . . and . . .

*More arithmetic!*

"What is it that you fear, child?" the Mother asked once more.

"I'm not afraid of those (unfamiliar symbol—something small and scuttling and unpleasant)," the daughter addressed her sibling, mandibling. "Scared, scared, scared!" came the running edge of thought behind and around it.

"Don't be scared," Petey told her.

"I'm not afraid of those old bugs!" she told him.

But it wasn't Petey, really; it was that big Mother-bug in the box. *Mother-bug?* What made her think that? That was what Petey thought . . .

Deborah was all mixed up. And she was scared; she was scared for Petey, and scared because she didn't know how they put things in her mind, and scared . . .

Scared all the time except when that good-feeling laughing was in her head; and then, even though she knew the—the *Mother-bug* must be doing that too, she couldn't be scared.

Deborah stood still, trembling with the realization of the awfulness of destruction she would somehow have to visit upon this bunch of bugs, if anything bad happened to Petey. She didn't understand how she had come to let them get him out of the ship at all; and now that they had him, she didn't know what to do about it. The first large tear slid out of the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek.

"Make food for sibling?" the Mother inquired, as she watched the clear liquid ooze out of the openings she had at first thought to be twin eyes.

The Strange daughter was apparently receiving all communication as if from the babe, for her answer was addressed to him: a reassurance, a promise, "I will prepare (unfamiliar symbol) inside the . . ." Another unfamiliar symbol there—*ship*—but with it came an image

of an interior room of Strange appearance; and Daydanda safely guessed the symbol to refer to the Wings-House. The first symbol—*bottle*, she found now, in the babe's mind—was a great white cylinder, warm and moist, and connected with the sucking concept . . . but no time to classify it further, because the older child was mandibling another message, this time directly to the Mother.

"Return the babe to me, The babe is hungry. I must prepare his food."

"You have food for the sibling now," Daydanda pointed out patently. "Come here to the litter and feed him."

"Sure there's milk," Dee said. "There's lots of milk, Petey. I'll give you a bottle soon as we get back inside," she promised, and warned the big bug hopefully: "That baby's hungry; he's awful hungry—you wait and see. He'll start yelling in a minute, and then you'll see. You better give him back to me right now, before he starts yelling."

"There is much food inside the ship," the child told the babe, but all the while a background-message trickled out: "There isn't; there really isn't. It won't last much longer." And even as the two conflicting thoughts came clear in her own mind, Daydanda saw a large drop of the precious fluid roll off the girl's face and be lost forever in the ground.

"Come quickly!" she commanded. "Now! Come to the Mother, and give food to the babe. Quick!"

But the doltish child simply stood there rooted in her fears.

Maybe if she just walked right over and lifted him out of the big box, they wouldn't even try to stop her . . . but there were too many of them, and she didn't dare get much further away from the rocket.

"You better give him back to me," she cried out hopelessly.

It took a while to sort out the sense from the nonsense. Of course, the child believed the babe to be hungry

because the message about feeding came to her through him. Actually, the little one was warm and happy and content, with no more than normal infantile fantasies of nourishment in his mind. His belly was still half-full from earlier feeding.

But half-full meant also half-empty. If the older child was now producing food, and could not continue to do so much longer—as seemed clear from the contradictory content of her messages—the babe should have it now, while it was available. The daughter's reluctance to provide him with it seemed somehow connected with the *bottle* symbol. It was necessary to go into the Wings-House to get the *bottle* . . .

Daydanda searched the babe's mind once again. *Bottle* was food . . .? No . . . a *mechanism* of some sort for feeding. Perhaps the flat mandibles were even weaker than they looked; perhaps some artificial aid in nourishment was needed . . .

And that thought brought with an equally startling notion in explanation of the Wings-House . . . a Strange race of people might possibly need artificial Wings to carry out the nuptial flight . . .

That was beside the point from now. Think about it later. Meantime . . . she had to reject the idea of artificial aid in feeding; the babe's repeated sucking image was too clear and too familiar. He nursed as her own babes did; she was certain of it.

Then she recalled the Strange daughter's earlier crafty hope of finding some way to return to the Wings-House with the babe, and emerge no more. Add to that the child's threat that the babe, if not immediately returned to her, would start *yelling*—would attempt to block communication as the girl herself did. It all seemed to mean that *bottle* was not a necessity of feeding at all, but some pleasurable artifact inside the *ship*, somehow associated with the feeding process, with which the daughter was trying to entice the babe.

"You wish to feed?" Daydanda asked the little one, and made a picture in his mind's eye of the girl's face

with liquid droplets of nourishment falling unused to the ground.

"Not food," came the clear response. "Not food. *Sad*." Then there was an image once again of the tubular white container, but this time she realized the colour of it came from a cloudy fluid inside . . . *milk*. "Milk-food, Tears-crying-sad."

*Tears-crying* was for the face-liquid. It was useless, or rather useful only as emotional expression. It was a waste product . . . (and she had been right in the first guess about twin eyes!) . . . and then the further realization that the great size she had at first attributed to the *bottle* was relative only to the babe. The thing was a reasonably-sized, sensibly-shaped storage container for the nutrient fluid the babe and child called *milk*; and it was furthermore provided with a mechanism at one end designed to be sucked upon.

Out of the welter of freshly-evaluated information, one fact emerged to give the Lady an unanticipated hope.

There was food—*stored, portable* food inside the winged structure. The Strangers were *not biologically tied* to the Wings; there was no need to return the babe in order to satisfy its hunger. Babe and Strange daughter both could, if they would, return to Daydanda's House, there to communicate at leisure.

It remained only to convince the daughter . . . and Daydanda had not forgotten that the child was susceptible to the Homecalling and to laughter both.

### XIII

Deborah walked behind the litter where Petey rode in state with . . . with the *Mother* . . . and all around her walked a retinue of bugs; dozens of them. They walked on four front legs, heads carried down and facing backward, eyes looking forward. The tallest of them was just about her own height when it stood up straight. Walking this way, none of them came above her waist;

they weren't so awful if you didn't have to look at their faces.

Certainly they were smart—so smart it scared her some . . . but not as much as it would have scared her to keep on staying in the rocket. She was just beginning to realize that.

Dee still didn't know how they made her think things inside her head; or how they made Petey seem to talk to her; or how they knew what she was thinking half the time, even if she didn't say a word. She wasn't sure, either, what had made her decide to do what *the Mother* wanted, and packed up food to take along back to their house. She didn't even know what kind of a house it was, or where it was. But she was pretty sure she'd rather go along with them than just keep waiting in the rocket alone with Petey.

Wherever they were going, it was a long walk. Dee was tired, and the knapsack on her back was heavy. They'd started out right after lunch time, and now the dimness in the forest was turning darker, so it must be evening. It was hot, too. She hoped the milk she'd mixed would keep overnight; but she had crackers and fruit, too, in case it didn't. It wasn't the food that made the knapsack so heavy, though; it was the oxy torch she'd slipped into the bottom, underneath the clean diapers.

These bugs were smart, but they didn't know *everything*, she thought with satisfaction. They never tried to stop her from taking along the torch.

It was hot and damp, and the torch in the knapsack made a knobby hard spot bouncing against her back. But the bugs never stopped to rest; and Dee walked on in their midst, remembering that she was a Space Girl, so she had to be brave and strong.

Then suddenly, right ahead, instead of more trees, there was a bare round hill of orange clay. Only when you looked closer, it wasn't just a hill, because it had an opening in it, like the mouth of a cave, because the edges of the arch were smooth. It was even on both sides, and perfectly round on top; it had little bits of rock

or wood set in cement around the edges to make it keep its shape.

She couldn't tell what was inside. It was dark in there. *Too dark.* Deborah paused inside the entranceway, oppressed by shadows, aghast at far dim corridors. One of the bugs tried to take her hand to lead her forward. The touch was sticky. She shuddered back, and stood stock-still in the middle of the arch.

"*I hate you!*" she yelled at all of them.

"Not hate," said Petey, laughing. "Fear."

"I'm not scared of anything," she told him; "you're the one who's scared, not me. Petey's afraid of the dark," she said to the big bug. "You give that baby back to me right now. That's not your baby. He's *my* brother, and I want him back."

The rocket, lying helpless on its side in the bare black clearing, seemed very safe and very far away. Dee didn't understand how she could have thought—even for a little while—that this place would be better. Everything back there was safety; even the burned-out memory of the control room was sealed off behind a *safety* door. Everything here was strange and dark, and no doors to close on the shadows—just open arches leading to darker stretches beyond . . .

"'Afraid of a *door*!'" said Petey.

"I'm not afraid of any old door." Deborah's voice was hoarse from pushing past the choke spot in her throat that was holding back the tears. "You give me back my brother, that's all; we're not going into your house. He is, too, afraid of the dark; and *he* hates you too!" *A Space Girl is brave*, she thought, and then she said it out loud, and walked right over to the shadowy outline of the big bug's box, and reached in and grabbed for Petey.

Only he didn't want to come. He yelled and wriggled away; held on tight to the Mother-bug, and kicked at Dee.

She didn't know what to do about it, till she heard that good laughing in her head again. Petey stopped yelling, and Dee stopped pulling at him. She realized that she was very tired, and the laughing felt like home, like her own

mother, like food and a warm room, and a bed with clean sheets—and maybe even a fuzzy doll tucked in next to her as if she were practically a baby again herself.

She was tired, and she didn't feel brave any more. She didn't want to go inside, but she didn't want to fight any more, either—especially if Petey was going to be against her, too. She sat down on the ground under the arch to figure out what to do.

"Light?" a voice like Mother's asked gently inside her head. "You want a light inside?"

"I've got a light," Dee said, before she stopped to think. "I've got a light right here."

She dragged the knapsack around in front of her and dug down into it. She was going to have to go in after all; there wasn't anything else to do. She got the torch out, and turned it on low, so it wouldn't get used up too fast. Then she started laughing, because this time it was the bugs who were scared. They all started running around like crazy, every which way, and half of them ran clear way, inside.

The child was certainly resourceful, Daydanda thought ruefully, as she issued rapid commands and reassurances, restoring order out of the sudden panic that the light had caused among the sensitive unpigmented wingless ones.

*No daughter of mine, she thought angrily, with admiration, no daughter of mine would even dare to act this way!*

"So you begin to see, my dear Lady . . ." Kackot was obviously irritated and *not* impressed . . . "They have no place in the Household. Useless parasites . . . Why not admit . . .?"

"*Quiet!*"

Useless parasites? No! *Dangerous* they might well be; *useless* only if you counted the acquisition of new knowledge as of no use. The child would certainly have to be watched closely. This last trick with the light was really quite insupportable behaviour: rudeness beyond belief or toleration. Yet the bravado of the Stranger's attitude was not too hard to understand. Still unequipped for Mother-

hood, she had already acquired the instincts for it; she was doing, in each case, her inadequate best to protect both sibling and self from any possible dangers. And each new display of unexpected—even uncomfortable—ingenuity left Daydanda more determined than before to make both Strangers a part of her Household.

There was much to be learned. And . . .

Daydanda was many things:

As a Mother, she felt a simple warm solitude for two unmothered creatures.

As the administrative Lady of her Household, it was her duty first to make certain that the Strangers were so established that they could do no harm; and then to learn as much as could be learned from their Strange origins and ways of life.

As a person—a person who had flown, long ago, above the treetops—a person who had only a short time ago walked through the enlarged archway in defiance of all precedent and tradition—a person who had just this day dared the impossible, and ventured forth from her own House to make this trip—Daydanda chuckled to herself, and wished she knew some way to make the Stranger understand the quite inexplicable affection that she felt.

The child said the babe feared darkness; this was manifestly untrue. The Mother still held the soft infant in her arms, and she knew there was no fear inside that body. As for the older one—it was not lack of light that she feared, either. Yet if the presence of accustomed light could comfort her—why, she should have her light!

"Come, child," Daydanda coaxed the girl gently through the mind of the babe. "Inside, there is a place to rest. You have done much. Strange daughter, and you have done well; but you are tired now. Inside, there is safety and sleep for the babe and for you. Come with us, and carry your light if you will. But it is time now to sleep; tomorrow we will plan."

At the Lady's command, the litter-bearers picked up her stretcher once more, and the lurching forward motion recommenced. The child on the ground stood up slowly, holding her light high, and followed after them. All down

the dim corridors, Daydanda's warning went ahead, to spare those whom the little light might hurt from the shock of exposure.

## XIV

Deborah lay on her back on a thick mat on the floor. It had looked uncomfortable, but now that she was stretched out on it, it felt fine. She had no blanket, and no sheets, and she'd forgotten to bring along pyjamas. At first she tried sleeping in all her clothes, but then she decided they were only bugs after all, and they didn't wear anything; so she took off her overalls and shirt. The room was warm, anyhow—almost too warm.

She got up and went across the room to the other mat, where Petey was, and changed his diaper and took off the rest of his clothes, too. She didn't know what to do with the dirty things; there was no soil-remover here. Finally, she folded them up neatly—all except the dirty diaper, which she wadded up and threw in a far corner. The rest of the things they'd have to wear again tomorrow, dirty or not.

Then she propped up Petey's almost empty bottle, and went back to her own mat, lay down again, and turned the oxy torch as low as she could, without letting it go out altogether. She could barely see Petey across the room, still sucking on the nipple, though he was just about asleep.

They hadn't really been captured, she told herself. Nobody tried to hurt them at all. It was more like being *rescued*. She didn't know what would happen tomorrow, except one thing—and that was that she would have to go back to the rocket to get some clothes, at least. It was a long walk, though. Right now, she felt warm and safe and sleepy.

These bugs were smart, but there were plenty of things they didn't know at all . . .

She was pretty sure they wouldn't understand anything about the safety door, for instance. Unless . . .

Maybe they could find out about it in her mind. But even if they did, they wouldn't *understand* . . .

And they couldn't even find out anything, if she just didn't *think* about it any more. . .

That was the best way. *I'll just forget all about it*, she decided.

She felt very brave. The Space Girl Troup Leader on Starhope would be proud of her now, she thought, as she reached out and turned the light all the way off before she fell asleep.

Petey was crying again. "Shut up," Dee said crossly; "why don't you shut up a minute?"

Her eyes felt glued together. She didn't want to wake up. She was warm and comfortable and still very sleepy; and now that it was all over, why didn't Mommy come, and . . . ?

She opened one eye slowly, and couldn't see anything. It was pitch dark in the room; no lights or windows . . .

She reached out for the oxy torch, her hand scraping across the smooth clay floor, and it wasn't there. The bugs had taken it away. They had come in while she was sleeping and taken it . . .

Her hand found the torch, fumbled for the switch, and she had to close her eyes against the sudden bright flare of light. Petey, startled, stopped crying for a minute, then started in again just twice as loud.

The knapsack was in the corner, back of the light, and there was a bottle all ready for him inside it, but Dee still didn't want to get up. If she got up, it would be admitting once and for all that this was real, and the other part had been a dream—the part where she'd been waking up in a real bed, with Mommy in the next room ready to come and take care of them and give them breakfast.

It still felt that way a little bit, as long as she lay still with her eyes closed. *Mother in the next room . . .* Dee didn't want the feeling to stop, but she couldn't help it if the food was in this room. *Mother can't feed me . . .* That was a silly thing to think. She was a big girl; nobody had to *feed* her . . .

Dee got up and got the bottle for Petey, and some fruit and crackers for herself. She was wide awake now and she

knew she wasn't dreaming ; but when she was all done eating, she didn't know what to do. There was still some food left, but she wasn't really hungry. She knew she might need it later on, so she just sat around listening to Petey making sucking noises on his bottle, and wondering what was going to happen next.

## XV

The morning pattern of the Household was a familiar and punctilious ritual: a litany of order and affirmation. Each member of each Family knew his role and played it with conditioned ease ; the sum of the parts produced a choreography of timing and motion, such as had delighted the Mother on that day when she watched her mason sons construct the new arch in her double chamber.

Daydanda's great body rested now, as then, on the couch of mats from which she had once thought she would never rise again ; but her perceptions spread out of the boundaries of her Household, and her commands and reprimands were heard wherever her children prepared for the day's labour.

Some of the pattern was set and unvarying: the nurses to care for the babes, and the babes to the gardens to feed ; the growing sons and daughters to their classrooms, workrooms, and the training gardens ; those whose wings are sprouting to instruction in the mysteries of flight and reproduction.

The winged ones whose nuptial flight time has not come as yet wait in their quarters for assignments to scouting positions for the day ; the builders breakfast largely to prepare cement, and gather up clay and chips for work in some new structure of the House ; the growers, gardeners, and harvesters spread out across the forest, clearing the fallen leaves and branches, sporing the fungi damming or redirecting a flow of water to some more useful purpose, bringing back new stores of leaf and wood and brush to fill the storage vaults beneath the House,

It was never precisely the same. There was always  
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some minor variation in the combination of elements: a boundary dispute today on this border, instead of the other; a new room to add to the nursery quarters, or an arch to repair in the vaults; a garden to replant into more fertile soil. And on this particular morning, two matters of special import claimed the Lady's attention.

The most urgent of these was the reconditioning of the disturbed Bigheads. Two of the eldest winged daughters—both almost ready for nuptial departures from the Household—had been assigned to work with the nurses who ordinarily tended to the needs of the corral. Under different circumstances, Daydanda would have considered the process worthy of her own direct supervision. Now, however, she contented herself with listening in semi-continuously on the work being done. The programme was proceeding slowly—too slowly—but as long as some progress was being made, she refrained from interfering, and concentrated her own efforts on a matter of far greater personal interest: the Strangers in the House.

Or, rather, the Strange daughter. The babe was no great puzzle; his wants were familiar, and easy to understand. Food and love he needed. The latter was easy; the former they would simply have to find some way to provide . . .

She pushed aside the train of thought that led to making these new arrivals permanent members of the Household. No telling how much longer their supply of their own foods would last; nor whether it would be desirable to keep them in the House. For the time being, Daydanda could indulge her curiosity, and concentrate on the unique components of the Strange daughter's personality.

The child was a conglomeration of contradictions such as the Mother would not previously have believed possible in a sane individual—in one who was capable of performing even the most routine of conditioned tasks, let alone initiating such original and independent actions as those of the Stranger.

And yet, the confusions that existed in the child's thought patterns were so many, and so vital, it was a wonder she could even operate her own body without

having to debate each breath or motion in her neurones first.

*Fear!* The child was full of fear. And something else for which there was no proper name at all: *I should—I shouldn't.*

Impossible confusion, resulting even more impossibly in better-than-adequate responses!

*Hunger . . . Mother . . . hunger . . . Mother? . . .*

The drifting thoughts merged with the Lady's reflections, and for a moment she was not certain of the source. Too clearly-formed in pattern to be the babe . . . and then she realized it was the older one, just waking from sleep, and still stripped of defences.

"I cannot feed you, child," she answered the Strange daughter's unthinking plea. "Not yet. You brought food with you from your . . . ship. Eat now, and feed the babe; then we will make plans for tomorrow."

But in her own mind, Daydanda knew, there was no question of what plans to make. If there were any way to do so, she meant to have the Strangers stay within her House. She meant to have the secrets of the Strange Wings-House explored and uncovered and to learn the Strange customs and knowledge. It remained only to determine whether it was possible to feed them and care for them adequately within the Household . . . and to convince the strange daughter to stay.

The Mother opened her mind once more to her sons and daughters, at their tasks, and found that all was well throughout the Families. Then she waited patiently till the Strangers were done feeding.

Pete was sleeping. All he ever did was drink milk and go to sleep and yell and act silly. Dee got up and walked around the room, but there was nothing to see and nothing to do.

She didn't even remember which way they had come to get to this room last night, and she didn't know whether they'd let her go out if she wanted to. There was no door closing the room off from the corridor—just another open archway. But outside there was only dimness and darkness.

Abruptly, she picked up the torch and walked to the doorway, flared brilliance out into the hall, and peered up and down. After that she felt better, at least they weren't being *guarded*. She had seen half a dozen other open arches along the corridor, but not even a single bug anywhere.

When Petey woke up, she decided they'd just start walking around until they found some way to get out. She'd have to wait for him to get up, though, because she couldn't carry the lighted torch and the baby both; and even if she didn't need it to see with, she had to have the torch turned up real bright, because that's what they were afraid of. They wouldn't bother her . . .

*They're not all scared of the light*, she thought. *Just the white-coloured ones are*. She wondered how she knew that, and then forgot about it, because she was thinking: *If we did get out of here, I don't know how we could get back to the rocket*.

It was a long way, and she'd have to carry Petey most of the time; and she didn't know which way it was, and . . .

*I'm going to go find the Mother-bug!* she decided. For just an instant after that she hesitated, wondering about leaving Petey, but somehow she felt it was all right. He was asleep, and she figured if he woke up and started yelling, she could hear him; any place in here she'd be able to hear him because there weren't any doors to close in between.

She picked up the torch again, and turned it down low, so there was just enough light to see her way. *Don't scare them*, she thought. *They're friends*. But it was comforting to know, anyhow, that she *could* scare them just by turning it up. The white ones were the only ones who couldn't *stand* it, but none of them were used to bright light.

She wondered again how she knew that, and tried to remember something from last night that would have let her know it, but that time she was too busy trying to figure out which corridors and archways would take her to the Mother-bug's room.

## XVI

A tremendous excitement was building up inside Daydanda's vast and feeble bulk, while she guided the Strange child through the labyrinth of the House from the visitor's chamber near the outer walls to her own central domain.

Yesterday, for the first time in many years of Motherhood, she had experienced once more—with increasing ease and pleasure through the day—the thousand subtly different sensations and perceptions of direct vision. Through all the years between, she had known the *look* of things outside her chamber—and of beings outside her own Families—only through the distortions and dilutions of the minds of her sons and daughters, travelling abroad on missions of her choosing, and reporting as faithfully as they could, all that they saw and touched and felt for her appraisal.

But no image filtered through another's brain emerges quite the same as when it entered . . . and no two beings, not even those as close as Mother and daughter, can ever see quite the same image of an object. Certainly, Daydanda had perceived both more and less of the winged object in the clearing when she viewed it with her own eye, than when she had watched it through the mind of her scouting son.

And now she was to have the Strange child here before her eyes again, to watch and study! The thought was so far-removed from precedent and past experience, it would not have occurred to her at all to have the girl come to her chamber. But when she tried to make the child aware of her desire to converse, to exchange information, the prompt and positive response had come clearly: *I want to see the Mother. I want to try and talk to her.*

And behind the response was a pattern Daydanda dimly perceived, in which two-way communication was *commonly associated* with visual sensation. The girl seemed to *assume* that an exchange of information would occur only where an exchange of visimages was also possible!

And now the child was standing in the entrance to the new chamber, and the background patter of her mind was a complaint about the difficulty of seeing clearly.

"You may have more light, child, if you wish to see me more clearly," the Mother assured her. "I told you before, it is only the ones unpigmented who are harmed by the brightness, and only the wingless who fear it at all."

An instant later, she realized she had been boasting. The flaring-up of the light caused her no agony, such as she had experienced the day before; but it was quite sufficient to cause her to turn her face abruptly toward the stranger, so as to shield her eye.

And then there was a far worse pain than anything her eye could feel. The Mother's vanity was almost as carefully fed, and quite as much enlarged, as her great abdomen; certainly it was far more vulnerable to attack.

Nobody had ever thought her anything but beautiful before. The Stranger child, at the first

Deborah stood in the open archway between the two big rooms, and peered intently at the great bulk of the Mother-bug on the couch of mats against the far wall. Then she decided it was all right now to turn the torch up high, so she could see something more than her own feet ahead of her.

The shadows jumped back, and the gently heaving mass on the cot sprang suddenly into full view. Deborah stood still, and gawped at ugliness beyond belief.

The big bug's enormous belly was a mound of grey-white creases and folds and bulges under the sharp light, reflecting pinpoints of brightness from oily looking drops of moisture that stood out all over the dead-looking mass.

And up above the incredible belly, a cone-shaped bulbous lump of the same whitish grey that must have been a face despite its eyeless lack of any expression, tapered into six full thick lips just like the ones of the baby bugs in the fungus garden.

clear look, thought she was . . .

Ugly and awful and frightening and fat!

It was the clearest, sharpest message she had had at any time from the Strange daughter . . . that she was hideous!

Shame and disappointment both receded before a sudden access of fury. Reflexively, Daydanda shot out a spanking thought; and in the very next instant, regretted it.

"I am sorry, child. I should not have punished you for what you could not help thinking, but . . . I am not used to such thoughts."

"You did that?" the child demanded, and angrily: "You meant to do it?"

"I did not plan to do it; but it was done with volition, yes."

The Stranger, Daydanda felt, had no clear concept in her mind to understand that distinction. A thing was done either—on purpose was the child's symbol, or else involuntarily. Nothing in between. Well, it was a common enough childish confusion, but not one the Mother would have expected in this uncommon child.

It was a good thing, Dee thought, that she hadn't seen the Mother-bug this close the day before. She never could have made herself believe that anything that looked . . . that looked like that . . . could possibly be friendly.

She tried now to believe it was true, tried to remember that good-feeling laughter that she was certain had come from the big bug; but the inside of her head had begun to prickle, just as if somebody was sandpapering in back of her eyes. She shook her head, rubbed at her stinging eyes, sniffled, and the feeling went away as suddenly as it had come.

Then she got mad. "You did that on purpose!" she gasped. And then a moment later, she had a crazy thought come through her head that the Mother-bug wanted her to feel better, like sometimes Mom . . . the way a mother, maybe, would feel bad after she'd spanked a child. The idea of being a big fat bug's little girl was too silly, and she couldn't help laughing. Then she felt the same kind

"It was a punishment," she tried to explain, "which I had no right to administer. You are my guest, and not my daughter. I offer apology."

"I am laughing," came a mandible message; but the background was a quick shiver of fear. Daydanda tried to soothe the fright away, and the laughing stopped, to be replaced by a sturdy mandibled denial of the fear that was, truthfully, already considerably lessened. And then an apology! "I am sorry," the child said. "It was most improper of me to laugh." And the background message was not different, but only more specific: "It was very rude of me to be frightened at the idea of being your daughter."

This time Daydanda repressed her reflexive irritation. "Laugh when you like, child," she said; "perhaps it is a good way to release your fear."

Promptly, she was rewarded by a clear, unmandibled, but strong reply: "You're good; I like you. I don't care what you look like."

The woman's vanity

of panting inside her head that she remembered from last night, and she knew what Mother-bug thought.

"I am not scared," she said emphatically. "What do you think I do? Laugh when I get scared?" Then she thought it over and decided it wasn't very nice of her to laugh at an idea like that — about being the Mother-bug's child—if the big bug really could read her mind, so she apologized.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess it wasn't very nice of me to laugh at you." And she had a feeling as if the Mother-bug knew she had apologized, and was telling her it was all right.

The big old bug was ugly, all right, Dee thought, but so were a lot of people she'd seen . . . and the bug was really pretty nice. Good, sort of, the way a mother ought to be . . .

Just the same, Dee realized, she didn't want to stay here. She didn't want to stay in the rocket either, though. I don't know which is worse, she thought

quivered, but her curiosity triumphed. The child, at long last, was receptive to communication. Daydanda withdrew from contact entirely, to calm her wounded feelings, and to formulate carefully the question now uppermost in her mind: how to gain more knowledge of the Wings-House in which the Strangers had arrived.

mournfully; then she decided this was worse—even though a lot of ways it was better—just because she didn't know whether she could get out if she wanted to.

She had to find that out first. She had to get back to the rocket. Once she was safe inside again, with Petey, she could make up her mind.

## XVII

"I have to go back to the rocket," Dee said out loud. "I have to go and get us some clothes, anyhow, if we're going to stay here."

Then she thought she felt cold, but there was a question-y feeling in her mind; she decided the Mother-bug must be *asking* her if she was cold, and finally realized that that was because she had said they needed clothes.

"No, I'm not cold," she said. "We have to have some clothes, that's all. The ones we wore yesterday are dirty. Unless . . ." Unless they had a soil-remover. Then she'd have to think of some other reason to go back to the rocket. "Unless you have some old clothes around," she finished up craftily. But it sounded silly, and her voice sounded too loud anyhow, everytime she said anything, as if she were talking to herself . . . and how did she know she wasn't, anyhow? How did she know she wasn't making it all up?

The feeling she got was so exactly like the sound of her own mother's little impatient sigh when Dee was being stubborn, that it was suddenly impossible to go on doubting at all.

*(To be concluded)*

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